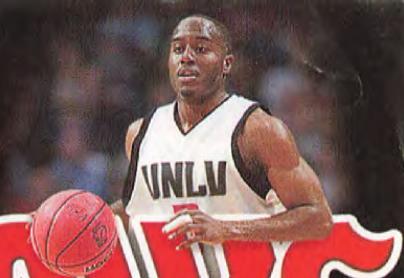


THE NCAA Tournament
Sorting out the

SWEET 16



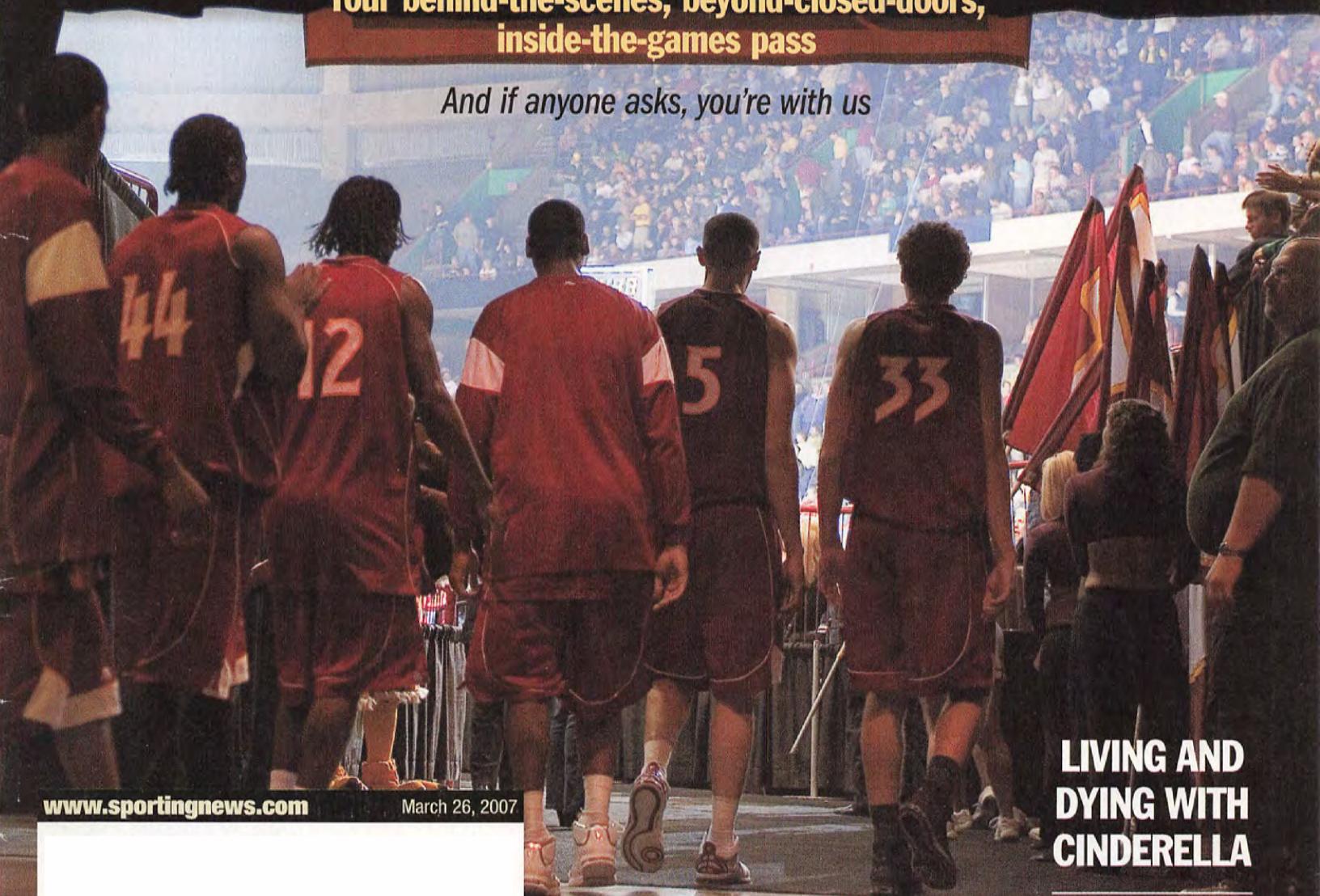
Sporting News

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And if anyone asks, you're with us



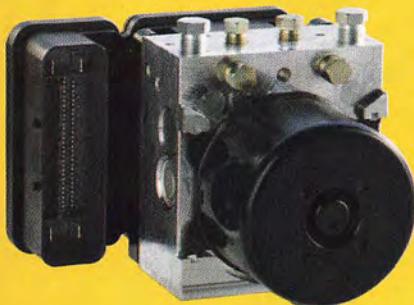
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March 26, 2007

LIVING AND
DYING WITH
CINDERELLA

5 days @
The Dance
page 20

EBD. THREE LETTERS PREVENT CERTAIN



INTRODUCING THE ALL-NEW FULL-SIZE TUNDRA. Short for Electronic Brake-force Distribution, EBD redistributes brake force to help maximize stopping power, even while hauling a heavy load. Along with VSC, TRAC, ABS, and Brake Assist,² EBD is one of the features of the Toyota Star Safety System.TM It's part of the most comprehensive suite of safety equipment in its class, and it comes standard on every new Tundra.

The ABC's of ABS. The 4-wheel Anti-lock Brake System (ABS) repeatedly releases brake pressure for fractions of a second. Instead of locking up the wheels in an emergency braking situation, ABS helps keep them rotating, so the driver can retain steering control.

Vehicle Stability Control (VSC):
VSC is a technology that uses the braking system to help restore the intended steering angle if a loss of traction is detected during cornering.



THE RIGHT HARDWARE. THE RIGHT SOFTWARE. The all-new Tundra uses 4-piston front calipers—one of the first for a 1/2-ton truck—to grip its 13.9" x 1.26" vented front rotors. That is serious hardware. But it's the software that makes Tundra's brake control system so smart. Among the standard technologies on the all-new Tundra is Brake Assist,² which uses sensors to detect sudden or "panic" braking and, if necessary, applies additional brake pressure to help prevent a collision.

Find out more at toyota.com



THE TRUCK THAT'S CHANGING IT ALL.



TUNDRA

RS THAT'LL FOUR LETTERS.



*Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) is an electronic system designed to help the driver maintain vehicle control under adverse conditions. It is not a substitute for safe driving practices. Factors including speed, road conditions and driver steering input can all affect whether VSC will be effective in preventing a loss of control. Please see your Owner's Manual for further details. *Brake Assist is designed to help the driver take full advantage of the benefits of ABS. It is not a substitute for safe driving practices. Braking effectiveness also depends on proper brake-system maintenance and tire and road conditions. SR5 Double Cab shown with available 5.7L V8. ©2007 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

THIS WEEK

> **NCAA TOURNAMENT**
12 Something old for a change

In the Year of the Freshman, players with a bit more experience had the biggest impact on the first two rounds of the tournament. *By Mike DeCourcy*



MATTHEW KUTZ FOR SN

THE ALL-ACCESS ISSUE

COVER STORY

20 Inside a glass slipper weekend

You watch the games every day, all year long, but a lot goes on before, during and after, behind the scenes. Our 22 pages of unlimited access start with the Winthrop basketball team, which pulled off one of the biggest upsets in the first four days of the Big Dance. *By Ryan Fagan*

Want more? Go inside ...

24 ... the Falcons' Combine interviews Get a feel for how NFL teams get a feel for their prospective draft picks. *By Dan Pompei*

25 ... LeBron's Hummer Fit—and customized—for a king. *By Kyle Veltrop*

26 ... the creative process How the World Series MVP pulled together a book about overcoming the odds in baseball—and life. *By David Eckstein*

28 ... an NBA locker room Join the Hawks at halftime, but leave your sensitivity at the door. *By Sean Devaney*

30 ... the perfect paint job Get behind the shine on Notre Dame's helmets. *By Jessica Daves*

32 ... an airborne icon Hitching a ride on the Goodyear blimp delivers a memorable football high. *By Dennis Dillon*

33 ... tricks of the trade NHL players cut, curve, tape, sharpen and customize equipment in their search for the perfect fit. *By Kara Yorio*

34 ... a long courtship While colleges are fawning over Patrick Patterson, he is playing the waiting game—and loving it. *By Mike DeCourcy*

36 ... a recruiting haul The Lakeland Seven put Florida's football team at the top of the signing heap. *By Matt Hayes*

37 ... Clint Bowyer's motorcoach Picture, if you will, a palace on wheels. *By Matt Crossman*

38 ... life on the road A day with the Jazz reveals just how much NBA players hate to have their routines disrupted. *By Phil Miller*

40 ... Monday Night Football Hanging out with NFL sideline reporters means looking out for the cart, staying off camera and running—a lot. *By Tricia Garner*

41 ... Smoke on the air Step inside the "studio" and find out why *Tony Stewart Live* is a lot like, well, *Tony Stewart* live. *By Matt Crossman*

COVER PHOTO BY JAY DROWNS / SN

KNOW IT ALL

5 To Know List Even NFL players say it's time to bring quarterbacks out of their protective bubble.

9 On Deck Check out the future college basketball stars who will dazzle us for one year before leaving for the NBA. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.

10 Your Turn Does Slammin' Sammy have enough in the tank to make it to the fall?

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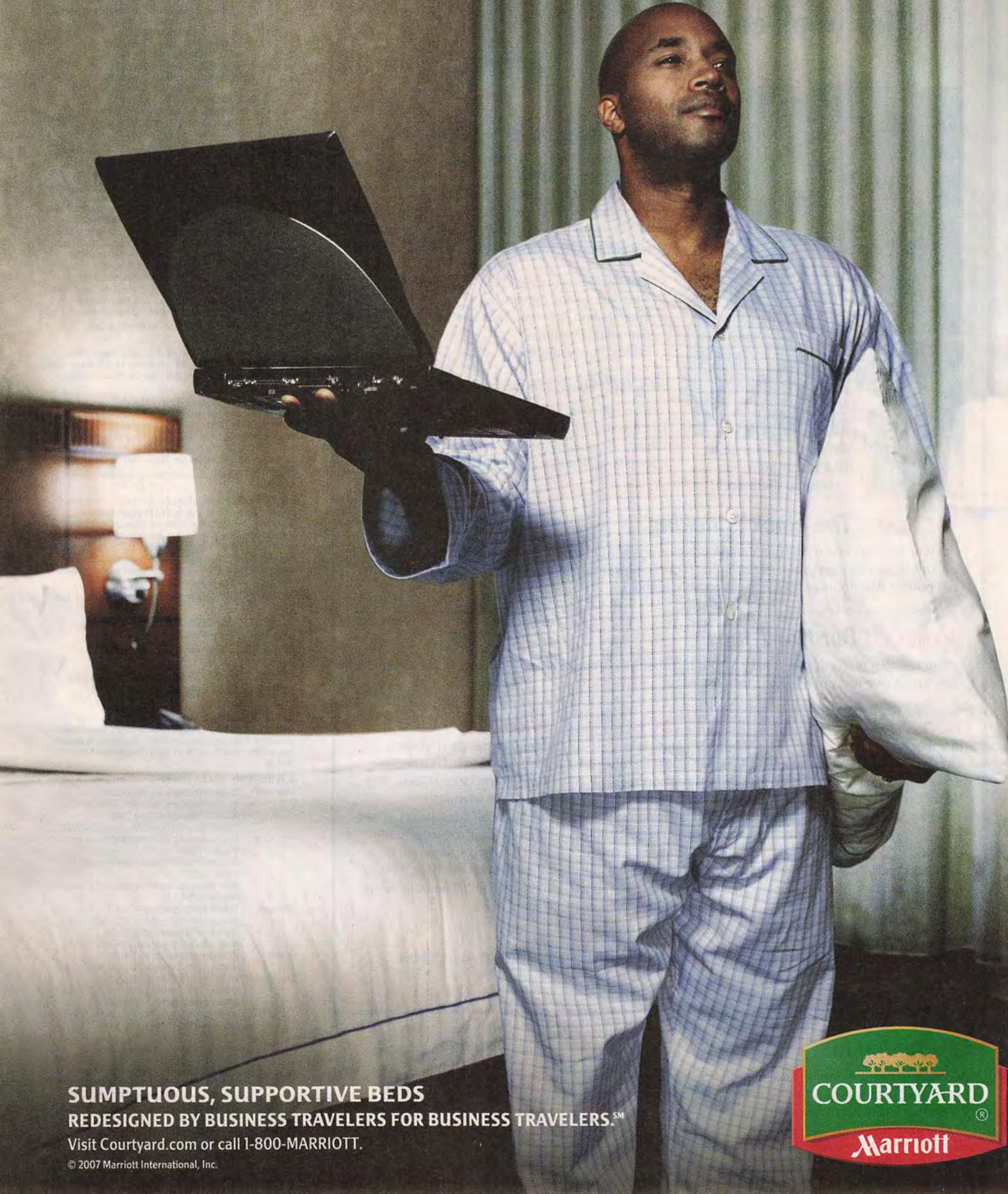
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This week on **SportingNews** .COM



/FANTASY BASEBALL/ **Don't lose before you start**

It's almost time for the first pitch, so don't get caught scrambling for your fantasy lineup. Check in with Fantasy Source Baseball for expert advice, draft strategy, player analysis, team fantasy previews and more at fantasygames.sportingnews.com/baseball.

Monday: Reds preview

Tuesday: Astros preview

Wednesday: Relief pitchers analysis

Thursday: Draft tips

Friday: Injury analysis

A glut of games

Choose from Ultimate Fantasy Baseball, Draft & Trade Baseball, Fantasy Baseball Commissioner and more—or sign up for them all—at fantasygames.sportingnews.com.

/NFL DRAFT/ **The clock is ticking**

Calvin Johnson and other Big Men on Campus are getting ready to become freshmen again—only this time, they'll get paid. Get scouting reports, player rankings, mock drafts and more in the Pro Football War Room at sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom.

/MEMBERS/ **Our No. 1 fans**

Our new fan rosters make it easy to find member blogs, analysis and a ranking of each team's fans. Check out some of our No. 1 fans by team:

YANKEES

Member name: Blitz-d
Member since: December 2002
Hometown: Queens, N.Y.
No. of SN friends: 408
What an SN friend says about him: "Here's the real King of Queens."
Thoughts on NASCAR: "Let's see them do it on the Long Island Expressway."

RED WINGS

Member name: H3S
Member since: October 2002
Home state: South Carolina
No. of SN friends: 1,280
What an SN friend says about him: "The greatest SPORTING NEWS has to offer."
Fantasy stance: "Even golf makes a great fantasy sport."

BRONCOS

Member name: 1Uglygirl
Member since: August 2002
Hometown: Grand Chute, Wis.
No. of SN friends: 62
What an SN friend says about him: "An authentic, genuine and dead-on sports fan."
Thoughts on the NFL: "Please take the Hollywood out of my game!"

Do you have what it takes to be a No. 1? Sign up for your free blog at members.sportingnews.com/member.

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TO KNOW LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

Anger in the ranks

In this day and age, with NFL pass rushers bigger, stronger and faster than ever, quarterbacks have to be pretty bad dudes themselves just to stay on the field. The great ones—Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Brett Favre—are universally admired for more than their golden arms and unflappable dispositions. They're tough guys.

But not tough enough—at least that's how those they play with and against see it.

With the annual NFL meetings set to begin Sunday in Phoenix, we polled two veteran players from each team (average experience: 6.3 years) to find out the single rule they would most like to see changed. (Insider Paul Attner's suggestions appear on page 45.) Overwhelmingly, the players, including 19 with Pro Bowls on their resumes, voiced

'You can't even touch Michael Vick without getting fined.'

—An NFC fullback

dissatisfaction with the flags that fly—and the fines that ensue—for roughing the passer.

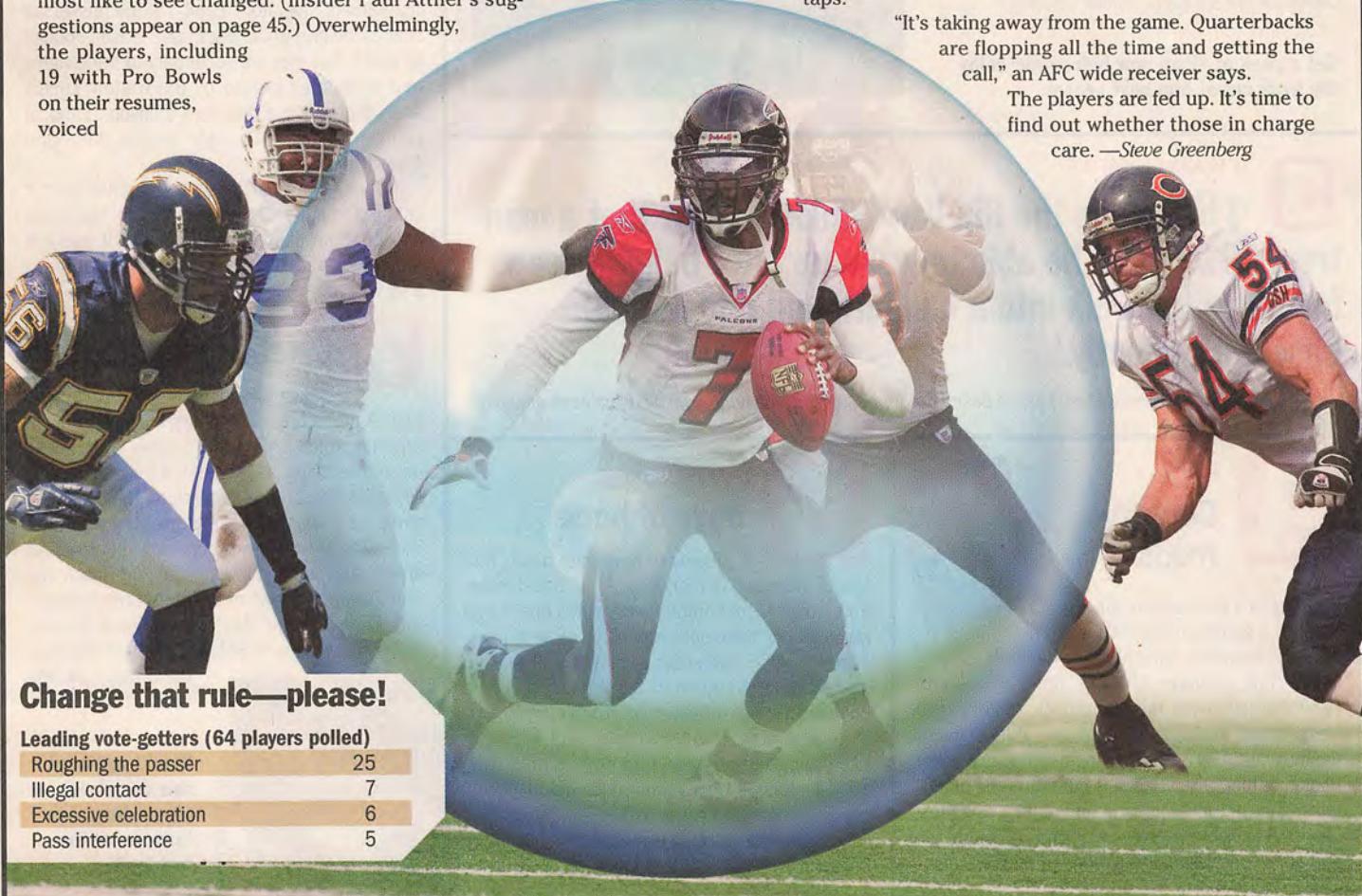
"We might as well give quarterbacks flags," an NFC linebacker says. "They get away with murder. They get paid the most. They get all the attention. They never get touched in practice. Now we can't even touch them in games."

It's not surprising to hear that from a defensive player, but get a load of these comments from players on the other side of the ball:

"It's getting a little too crazy," an NFC offensive lineman says. "I mean, they're calling penalties on hits that are no more than love taps."

"It's taking away from the game. Quarterbacks are flopping all the time and getting the call," an AFC wide receiver says.

The players are fed up. It's time to find out whether those in charge care. —Steve Greenberg



Change that rule—please!

Leading vote-getters (64 players polled)

Roughing the passer	25
Illegal contact	7
Excessive celebration	6
Pass interference	5

PHOTOS BY BOB LEVERONE AND JAY DROWNS, ILLUSTRATION BY JACK KRUYN / SN

2

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: MCDONALD'S ALL AMERICANS

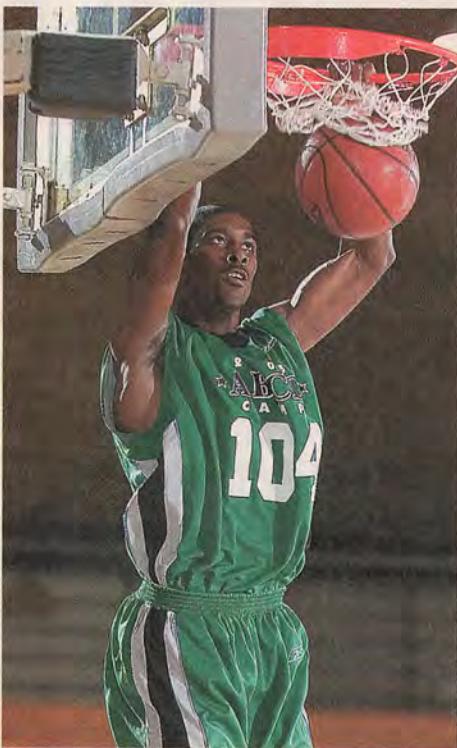
Sure, we'll take more Odens and Durants

Before the NBA introduced its age minimum, the McDonald's All American Game (8 p.m. Wednesday, ESPN) was a pickup-style audition for pro scouts. Now, it's a pickup-style audition to discover who'll be the college freshmen to watch in 2007-08.

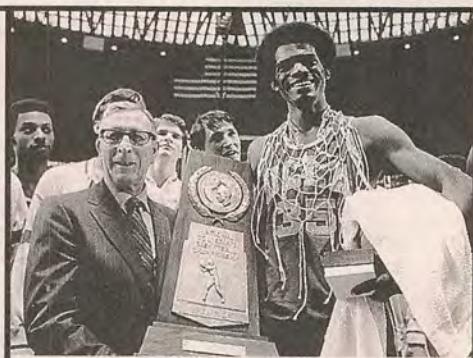
At Freedom Hall in Louisville, such stars as O.J. Mayo (Southern California), Michael Beasley (Kansas State), Kevin Love (UCLA), Eric Gordon (Indiana) and Derrick Rose (Memphis) will play one last meaningless game before heading off to spend a year in pursuit of NCAA Tournament bids and the quickest routes to those econ classes.

Although each of those players can become special, don't expect to find a level of talent similar to what was on display in last year's game. You will, however, find the usual number of future Dookies: guard Nolan Smith and forwards Taylor King and Kyle Singler. Georgetown and Syracuse are the only other schools with more than one participant—Chris Wright and Austin Freeman for the Hoyas, and Johnny Flynn and Donte Green for the Orange. —Mike DeCourcy

Get a peek at Mayo now before you enjoy the heck out of him next season.



BOB LEVERONE / SN



Wooden, Wicks et al. made it five NCAA titles in a row in 1971.

TELEVISION

6

The wizards of Westwood

Watch *The UCLA Dynasty*, an HBO documentary premiering Monday at 10 p.m. ET, and try not to wish things were more like they used to be. Some things, anyway.

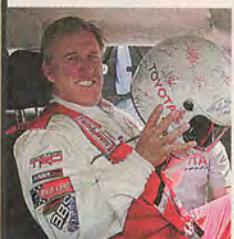
Set against the Vietnam War, the deadly Watts uprising and exploding drug use on the UCLA campus is the amazing and highly moving story of John Wooden's Bruins, who won 10 NCAA Tournament titles from 1964-75. The basketball scenes will give you chills; they're reason enough to watch. But they are secondary to the insights and anecdotes shared by Bill Walton, Lucius Allen, Sidney Wicks, Marques Johnson ... and, of course, Wooden. *Dynasty* warms, lifts—and breaks—the heart.

"When you're part of something like that, it changes your life forever," says Walton, who rarely has been so likable or authentic. "It was the players we had. It was the times. What it really was, was John Wooden." —S.G.

7

Celebrity leadfoots

Just call it *Fast Times at Hollywood High*. A dozen boldface names, including William Shatner, John Elway, Bill Cowher and Jewel, began practicing last week for a new ABC reality series. In *Fast Cars & Superstars*, celebrities will compete against one another at Lowe's Motor Speedway after receiving coaching from NASCAR drivers such as Jimmie Johnson, Kurt Busch and Carl Edwards. The show will debut this summer with ESPN's Kenny Mayne (who made his own reality show foray in Season 2 of *Dancing With the Stars*) as the host. —T.G.



MARK J. TERRILL / AP

Would you want this comeback king riding your bumper on the last lap?

3

IT BEARS REPEATING

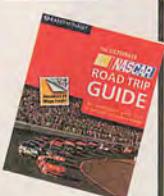
'I believe in the Rip Van Winkle theory: that a man from 1910 must be able to wake up after being asleep for 70 years, walk into a ballpark and understand baseball perfectly.'

—Former Major League Baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn, who died last week at age 80

4

BOOKS

Country roads



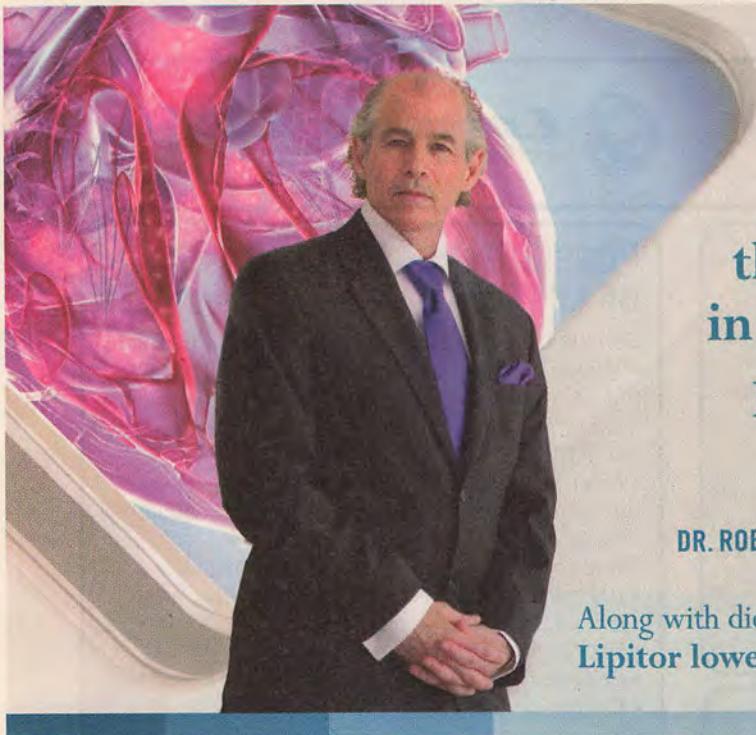
Going to a race is more than a trip to a sporting event—it's a weekend vacation. Rand McNally has published *The Ultimate NASCAR Road Trip Guide* (\$14.95) to get you there and back. The licensed book offers maps, directions and things to do around NASCAR's 31 tracks. An added bonus: aerial photos of the tracks. Bristol is cut out of the mountains, and the Brickyard is in an old Indy neighborhood. The book is available now at randmcnally.com and at select retailers this spring. —Matt Crossman

5

QUICK CLICKS

Rays of hope

Plenty of fans write blogs, but few of them pull in money to do it. Stockbroker and blogger Erik Kombol (who writes under the name Manny Stiles) put himself on eBay to raise money for AIDS awareness by blogging all season about the sports team of the winning bidder's choice. The high bidder? Devil Rays president Matt Silverman, at \$535. The result? The blog devilraysuniverse.blogspot.com. Silverman—who, like Kombol, lost a family member to AIDS—says Kombol will be free to write whatever he wants about the team. At least, you know, until the D-Rays are 30 games out of first. —Tricia Garner



**“Heart disease is
the #1 health problem
in America. Stroke is #3.
Lipitor helps reduce
the risk of both.”**

DR. ROBERT JARVIK ~ INVENTOR OF THE JARVIK ARTIFICIAL HEART

Along with diet and exercise,
Lipitor lowers bad cholesterol 39-60%.*

*Average effect depending on dose

Unlike some cholesterol-lowering medications, Lipitor has been approved to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke if you have several common risk factors for heart disease. Risk factors include family history, high blood pressure, age, low HDL ('good' cholesterol) or smoking.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: LIPITOR is a prescription drug. It is used in patients with multiple risk factors for heart disease such as family history, high blood pressure, age, low HDL ('good' cholesterol) or smoking to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. When diet and exercise alone are not enough, LIPITOR is used along with a low-fat diet and exercise to lower cholesterol.

LIPITOR is not for everyone. It is not for those with liver problems. And it is not for women who are nursing, pregnant or may become pregnant. If you take LIPITOR, tell your doctor if you feel any new muscle pain or weakness. This could be a sign of rare but serious muscle side effects.

Tell your doctor about all of the medicines you take. This may help avoid serious drug interactions. Your doctor should do blood tests to check your liver function before and during treatment and may adjust your dose. The most common side effects are gas, constipation, stomach pain and heartburn. They tend to be mild and often go away.

Please see additional important information on next page.

When diet and exercise are not enough, adding LIPITOR can help. LIPITOR is one of many cholesterol-lowering treatment options that you and your doctor can consider.

Could you be doing more...with Lipitor?

Ask your doctor. Call 1-888-LIPITOR (1-888-547-4867). Or find us on the web at www.lipitor.com

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IMPORTANT FACTS



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tablets

(LIP-ih-tore)

LOWERING YOUR HIGH CHOLESTEROL

High cholesterol is more than just a number, it's a risk factor that should not be ignored. If your doctor said you have high cholesterol, you may be at an increased risk for heart attack. But the good news is, you can take steps to lower your cholesterol.

With the help of your doctor and a cholesterol-lowering medicine like LIPITOR, along with diet and exercise, you could be on your way to lowering your cholesterol.

Ready to start eating right and exercising more? Talk to your doctor and visit the American Heart Association at www.americanheart.org.

WHO IS LIPITOR FOR?

Who can take LIPITOR:

- People who cannot lower their cholesterol enough with diet and exercise
- Adults and children over 10

Who should NOT take LIPITOR:

- Women who are pregnant, may be pregnant, or may become pregnant. LIPITOR may harm your unborn baby. If you become pregnant, stop LIPITOR and call your doctor right away.
- Women who are breast-feeding. LIPITOR can pass into your breast milk and may harm your baby.
- People with liver problems
- People allergic to anything in LIPITOR

BEFORE YOU START LIPITOR

Tell your doctor:

- About all medications you take, including prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, and herbal supplements
- If you have muscle aches or weakness
- If you drink more than 2 alcoholic drinks a day
- If you have diabetes or kidney problems
- If you have a thyroid problem

ABOUT LIPITOR

LIPITOR is a prescription medicine. Along with diet and exercise, it lowers "bad" cholesterol in your blood. It can also raise "good" cholesterol (HDL-C).

LIPITOR can lower the risk of heart attack or stroke in patients who have risk factors for heart disease such as:

- age, smoking, high blood pressure, low HDL-C, heart disease in the family, or
- diabetes with risk factor such as eye problems, kidney problems, smoking, or high blood pressure

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF LIPITOR

Serious side effects in a small number of people:

- **Muscle problems** that can lead to kidney problems, including kidney failure. Your chance for muscle problems is higher if you take certain other medicines with LIPITOR.
- **Liver problems.** Your doctor may do blood tests to check your liver before you start LIPITOR and while you are taking it.

Symptoms of muscle or liver problems include:

- Unexplained muscle weakness or pain, especially if you have a fever or feel very tired
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Brown or dark-colored urine
- Feeling more tired than usual
- Your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow

If you have these symptoms, call your doctor right away.

The most common side effects of LIPITOR are:

• Headache	• Constipation
• Diarrhea, gas	• Upset stomach and stomach pain
• Rash	• Muscle and joint pain

Side effects are usually mild and may go away by themselves. Fewer than 3 people out of 100 stopped taking LIPITOR because of side effects.

HOW TO TAKE LIPITOR

Do:

- Take LIPITOR as prescribed by your doctor.
- Try to eat heart-healthy foods while you take LIPITOR.
- Take LIPITOR at any time of day, with or without food.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. But if it has been more than 12 hours since your missed dose, wait. Take the next dose at your regular time.

Don't:

- Do not change or stop your dose before talking to your doctor.
- Do not start new medicines before talking to your doctor.
- Do not give your LIPITOR to other people. It may harm them even if your problems are the same.
- Do not break the tablet.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

- Ask your doctor or health care provider.
- Talk to your pharmacist.
- Go to www.lipitor.com or call 1-888-LIPITOR.



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LPIF Rev 2, Dec 2005

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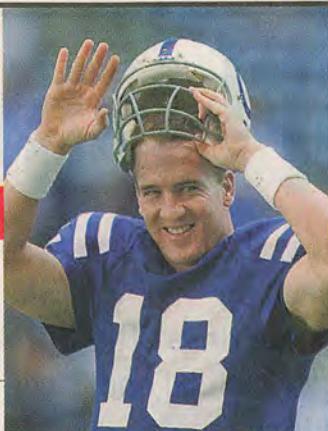
The week ahead in sports

THIS I GOTTA SEE

All times Eastern

SAT 24

No telling whether the enchantingly wacky pitchman will be able to make his hangdog baby bro laugh, but **Peyton Manning is host for Saturday Night Live** (11:30 p.m., NBC). Musical guest: Carrie Underwood—in our book, a far better choice than Rex Grossman and the Fumblin' Five.



ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES
'But seriously, folks, you've been a great crowd ...'

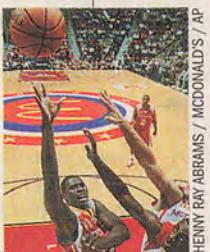
TUE 27

Devils at Islanders (7:30 p.m., Versus). Chris Simon won't be there, but don't get your stitches in a bunch—there'll be plenty of violence to go around for everyone.



WED 28

McDonald's All American Game (8 p.m., ESPN). Is it just us or are you also dying to get a look at this latest batch of McMen who have had the *child* deep-fried right out of them by a hideously obese sports culture?



SUN 25

NCAA Tournament region finals (2:30 p.m., CBS). After today's games, there's nothing left but the Final Four. Can you look at yourself in the mirror and say you did all you could with your bracket?



SUZANNE HANOVER / DREAMWORKS

THU 29

NIT championship (7 p.m., ESPN). Yes, we know—it will be almost impossible for you to be jazzed up with no chance for **South Carolina** to win its third NIT title in a row. But show a little Gamecocks spirit and try, for crying out loud.

FRI 30

Is there anything that makes you feel more alive with manliness than figure skating? Will Ferrell and Jon Heder are there for you with the nationwide opening of **Blades of Glory**. —Steve Greenberg

Whaddya say we get this party started, Mr. Howard?

COMING AT YOU

In the April 2 issue

Baseball preview. You know what? We don't want to hear that noise about *football* being the real national pastime. Not now, anyway. We are going to revel in the start of a new baseball season with blowout team previews, stat projections, player rankings and fantasy advice, a long, hard, close-up look at the extraordinary Ryan Howard, coast-to-coast observations and predictions from MLB Insider Stan McNeal and much more.

■ Who's the man behind the men? Meet our NFL Executive of the Year.

■ It's the Car of Tomorrow—but it's through waiting to get out there and race. We'll look at its NASCAR debut.



BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The NCAA Tournament.

It's a wild ride, but, honestly, I'll tell you how I define March Madness: the Nationals talking about contending.

2 Fantasy baseball.

I'm in deep trouble. I've got A-Rod. Am I worried about his subpar '06? No, but he called the other night to say it was up to me whether he stays on my keeper team.

3 The NBA.

Get this—they're discussing an All-Star Game overseas. Since things went so smooth in Las Vegas, right? I'm thinkin', y'know, Moscow on bread day.

4 Pete Rose.

I'm shocked—SHOCKED!—that Honest Charlie Hustle bet the Reds every night. Um, we are talking roulette, right?

5 The NFL.

A proposed player-conduct policy includes a one-year suspension for criminal behavior. In a related note, the Columbus Destroyers will replace the Bengals on the '07 schedule.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Never sleep on Timmy D (SN, March 19). He had more rings after his second season than Dirk Nowitzki and Steve Nash have put together. —freakhalidelamin via SportingNews.com

■ The Spurs are showing that consistent, steady play from Tim Duncan, Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker will make them championship favorites once again. They may not be a trendy team, but they're in the title mix every year.

—RobinSports.com via SportingNews.com

■ Isiah Thomas is the Teflon Executive. Everything he does wrong bounces off of him. He has left two NBA franchises and the CBA in worse shape than they were before he came. Yet he still gets opportunities.

—Ark_Razor via SportingNews.com

■ Great call, putting Davidson's Stephen Curry on your all-freshman team (SN, March 19). He gets very little ink because of the school he plays for, but he deserves more attention. He is absolutely amazing. He was passed up by many larger schools that have to be kicking themselves right now!

—idedek via SportingNews.com

■ I might have switched Aron Afflalo (first team) and Aaron Brooks (second team), but other than that, I'm glad you had the guts to pick a freshman (Kevin Durant) as player of the year.

—5288 via SportingNews.com

■ I'm a longtime SPORTING NEWS subscriber, and I think the March 12 bobbleheads cover is one of the coolest I've seen.

—UpstateNYViking via e-mail

■ It's ironic: The figurine you used to represent the University of Kentucky on your March 12 cover is just like the real team—soft, nonthreatening and in the background. Thanks, Tubby. Thanks a lot.

—Mark Liptak, Chubbuck, Idaho

■ Thanks to Steve Greenberg for telling it like it is regarding fighting in hockey (SN, March 5). I am a hockey purist, and I have seen the NHL go from the most exciting game in sports to one of the worst. Fighting brings back the passion and keeps the sticks down.

—Teddy Errico, Telluride, Colo.

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: IT'S PAINFUL TO WATCH

Posted by bbaroo

I have never seen an NBA player throw elbows out on the perimeter like Kobe Bryant does. He may be the most talented player in the league, but he must also be the most constipated with that wincing, crybaby look he always has on his face.

RE: WHO NEEDS TOMORROW WHEN YOU HAVE TODAY?

Posted by sarah242k

I think the Car of Tomorrow is a bunch of horse pucky. What is wrong with the cars now? We all saw David Reutimann's car get hit at California. NASCAR even said it was one of the hardest impacts ever. So tell me, what is the issue? Why do we need a safer car—and, mind you, one with an ugly spoiler?

RE: FEELING THE DRAFT

Posted by CowboyMagic31

The NFL draft is coming! Who should the Cowboys draft? A wide receiver? The Lions should have cured everyone of first-round wide receivers. No, you want impact players in the first round. What they really need is another defensive star they can plug in anywhere.

RADIO STAR

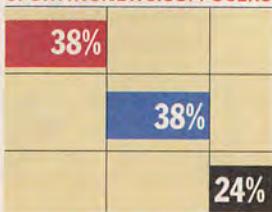
Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'George Mason was a one-time thing. To expect a Cinderella team to bring that much excitement every year is just stupid!' —Darren in Charlotte on the Tim Brando Show

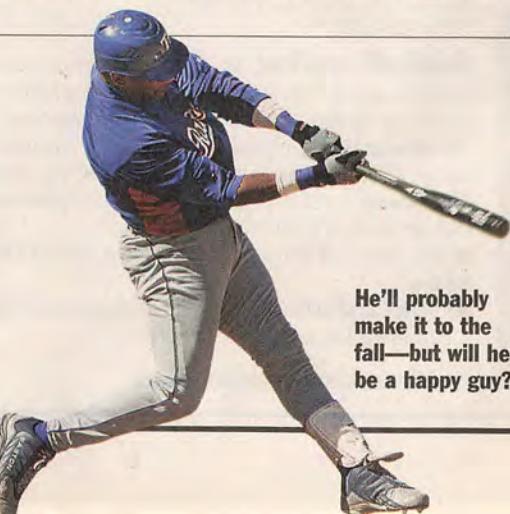
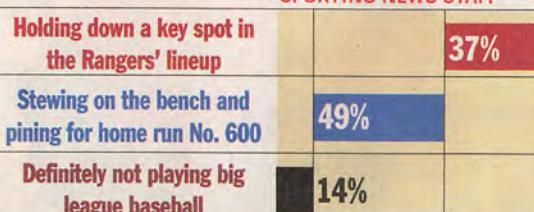
POLLING PLACE

Sammy Sosa is on fire! Alas, it's only spring training. What will he be doing six months from now?

SPORTINGNEWS.COM USERS



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He'll probably make it to the fall—but will he be a happy guy?

ROSS D. FRANKLIN / AP

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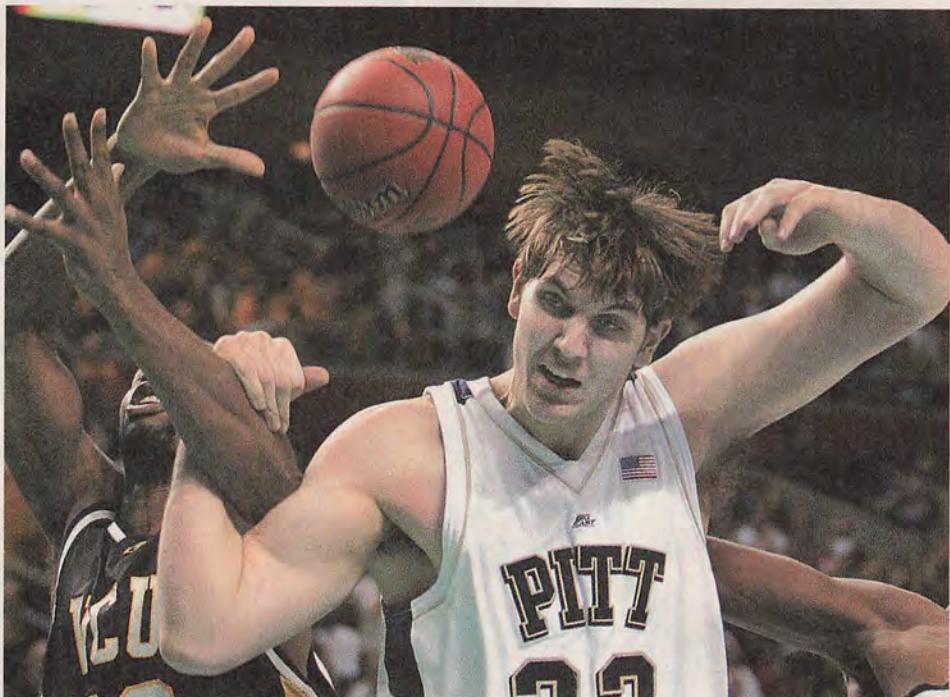
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They took a back seat all season, but experienced players are stepping up when it matters most

By Mike DeCourcy

Elder statement



DAVID DUPREY / AP

All season long, it has been Kevin Durant this and Greg Oden that. College basketball has been mostly about the freshmen. Durant scores 37 points and grabs 23 rebounds against Bob Knight's defense. Oden shoots free throws with his left hand. Durant strafes the competition for the national player of the year trophies. Oden leads Ohio State to the No. 1 poll ranking.

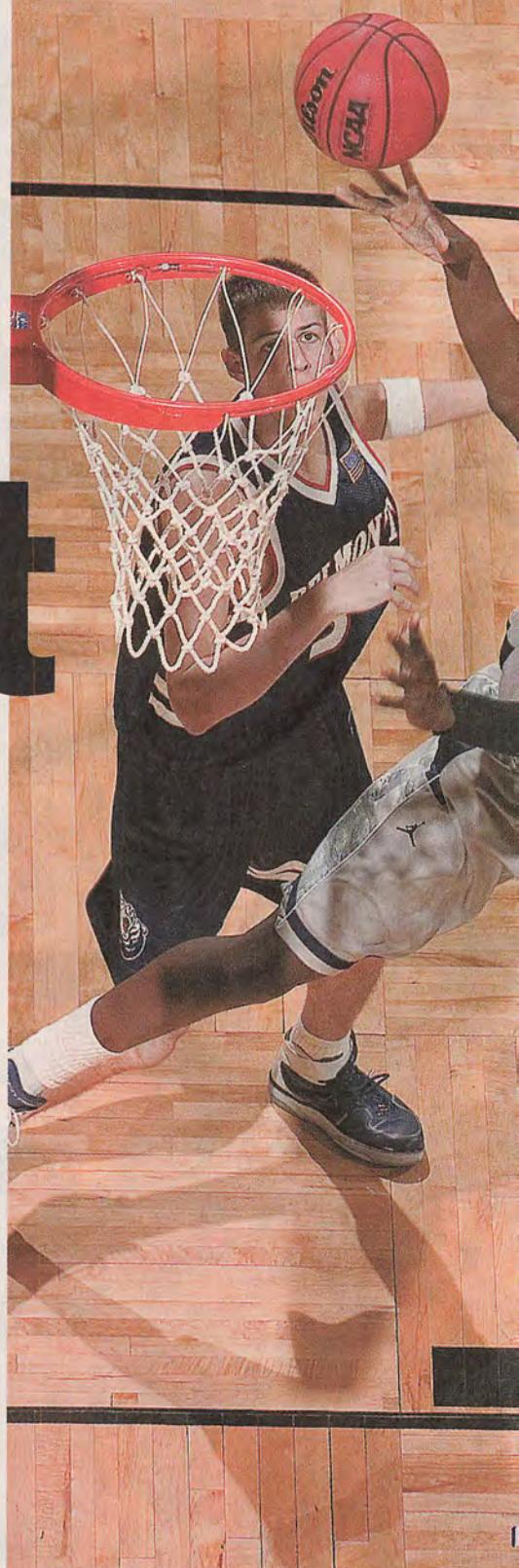
We have insatiable appetites for youth and celebrity in this country, so what could be better than both in the same package?

The regional semifinals of the NCAA Tournament, however, will be no Sweet 16 party. The

threshold separating the first weekend from the second proved imposing for many who had not encountered it before. Men decided the games that got teams this far, and mostly men will decide which teams move on to the Final Four at Atlanta's Georgia Dome.

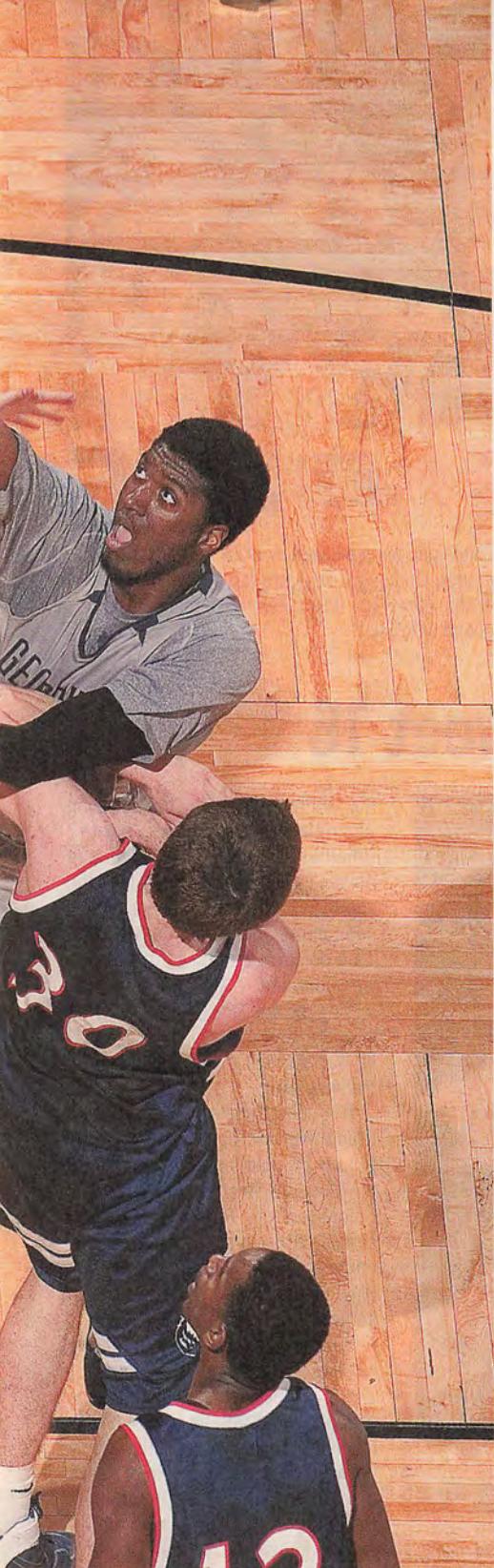
Some of those men might turn out to be in their teens—though Durant is gone, Oden still is lurking—but, at the least, they will share the stage with their elders:

■ Texas A&M senior point guard Acie Law's calm leadership against Louisville in hostile Rupp Arena got his team through a difficult second-round game. Law scored the Aggies' final four points on free throws in a 72-69



victory that sent them home to Texas for the South Region semifinals in San Antonio.

■ Georgetown's Patrick Ewing, a fourth-year junior, blew past the Boston College defense on a slick backdoor cut and reverse dunked while Jared Dudley fouled him with less than a minute to play. Ewing's three-point play secured the Hoyas' victory and sent them up the coast to East Rutherford, N.J.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

A little respect for experience, please. Pitt's Gray, Georgetown's Roy Hibbert and Butler's Crone helped prove veteran teams still have a few tricks up their sleeves.

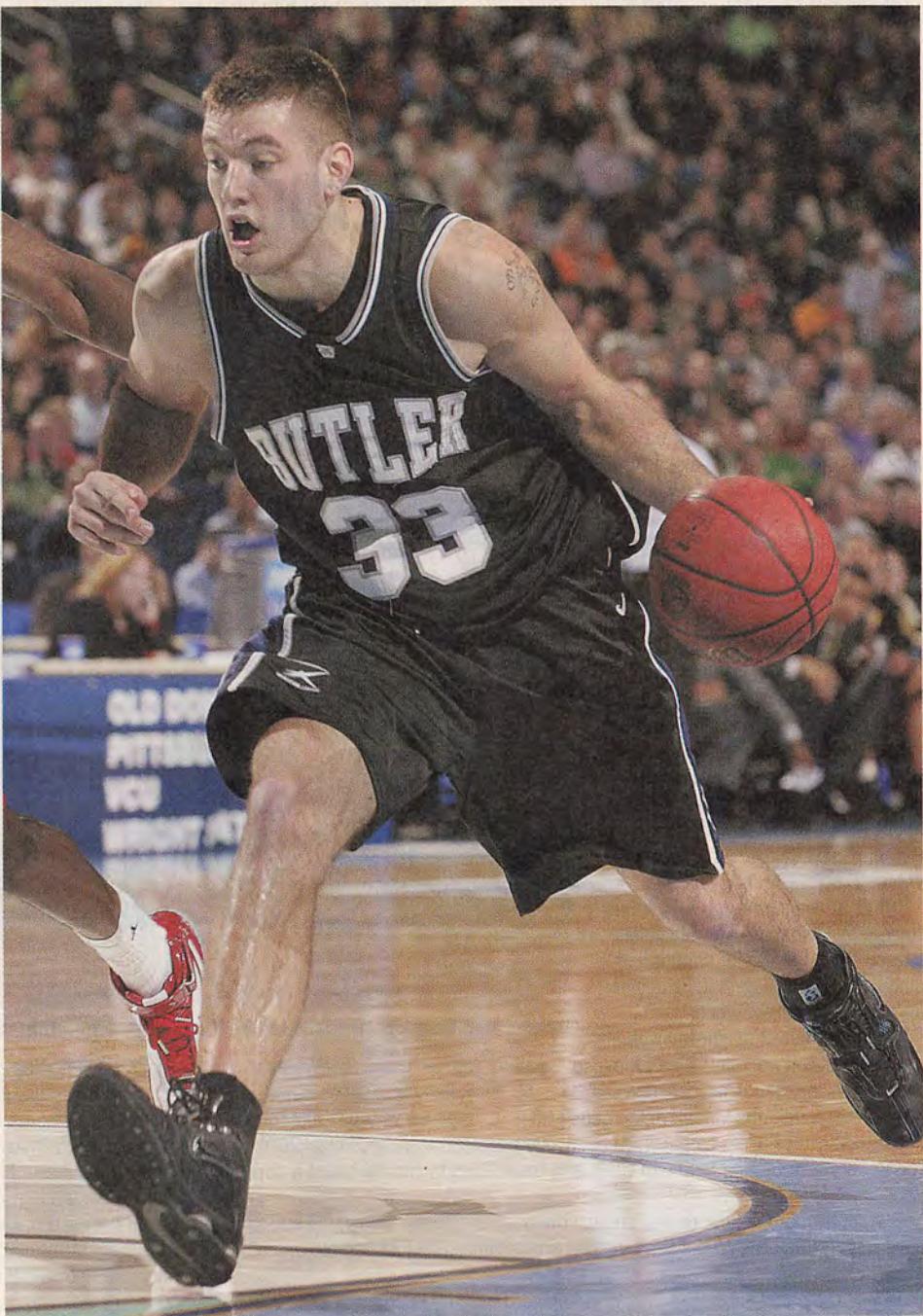
■ Bothered by an illness and a pressing Virginia Commonwealth team that forced him to run more than usual, Pittsburgh senior center Aaron Gray confirmed the worth of a veteran big man by scoring 14 points, including an inside bucket to open overtime, which helped send the Panthers to San Jose.

■ Butler senior he-man Brandon Crone threw himself in front of Maryland's D.J. Strawberry and drew a charging foul that proved decisive and sent the no-kids-allowed Bulldogs to St. Louis.

The NBA age minimum brought a flood of gifted freshmen into college basketball, but a lot of those guys now are sitting at home.

Of the 80 remaining starters in the NCAA Tournament, 53 are juniors or seniors. Most teams have no freshmen in their lineups, and most of those rookie starters still alive play for Ohio State and North Carolina. And who rescued them? The Buckeyes needed

fifth-year senior Ron Lewis to swish a 22-foot 3-pointer to force overtime against a feisty Xavier club that started three seniors and a fourth-year junior. The Tar Heels' precocious freshmen, save for point guard Ty Lawson, largely went silent as two-year



RICK STEWART / GETTY IMAGES

SWEET16 PREVIEW

All-American Tyler Hansbrough ground out 33 points and senior Reyshawn Terry scored 12 down the stretch against Michigan State.

This will be the third Sweet 16 for Pitt power forward Levon Kendall even though the Panthers' last trip to the second weekend was in 2004. That's how long he has been around. He redshirted during the first and was a bit player for the second, but his experience was a factor in his team's survival—even after he fouled out of the game against VCU, a game in which Pitt had blown a 19-point lead.

Sophomore Levance Fields, nearing the close of his first full season as starter, bricked two free throws with 2 seconds left, either one of which could have clinched a victory in regulation. He was crushed, obviously, but before he returned to the court for overtime he got a lecture from Kendall.

"I said, 'The game's not over. Redeem yourself right now. Make your presence known,'"

Kendall says. "He did a great job of that." Fields played well in overtime and sank an audacious 3-pointer that gave the Panthers some room to breathe.

The first year of the NBA draft age minimum brought a flood of gifted freshmen into college basketball, many of whom would have gone directly to The League if they had been born a year or two earlier. They discovered how challenging the intermediate step on the way to The League can be, however, and a lot of those guys are now at home: Durant, Arizona's Chase Budinger, Georgia Tech's Thaddeus Young and Javaris Crittenton, Louisville's Derrick Caracter. The older guys are getting their revenge.

"I don't know about that," Law says. "There's some talented freshmen out there. But at the same time, the seniors are starting to play well when it matters the most. I'm a senior now, so hopefully I can keep playing and make it all the way to Atlanta."

SN



RICH PEDRONCELLI / AP

SN umber 45.5

Points per game allowed by UCLA in the first two rounds. During last season's run to the championship game, the Bruins held three teams to 45 points or fewer.

Umeh ached to get UNLV to the Sweet 16

When it was over, it was guard Michael Umeh who grabbed the rebound, his seventh of the game. He sped down the floor, alone as the buzzer sounded on UNLV's biggest win in 16 seasons—a stunning upset of No. 2 seed Wisconsin in the tournament's second round—tossed the ball toward the rim and was mobbed by teammates.

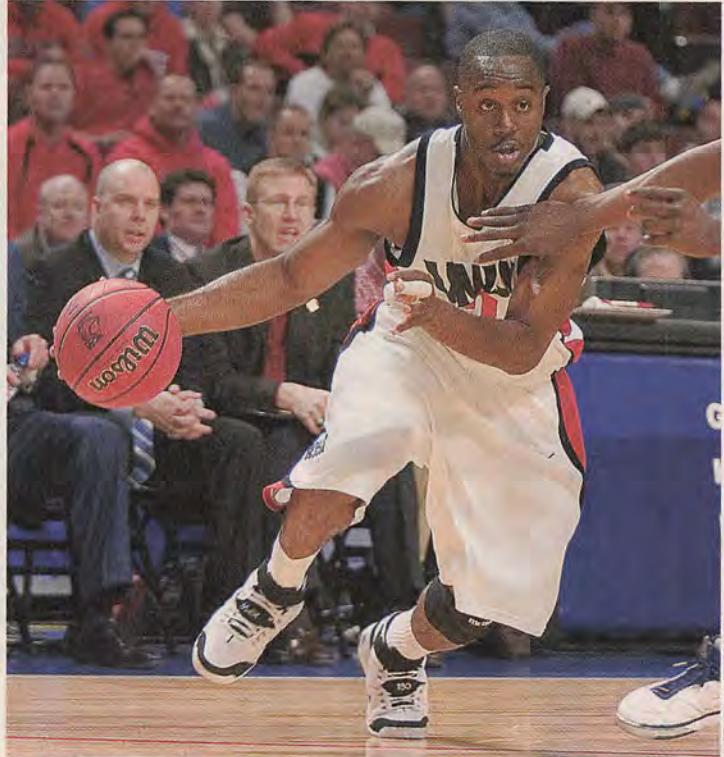
Fitting. If there's any player who represents the astounding awakening of UNLV basketball under coach Lon Kruger, it is Umeh—a player Kruger had to talk into staying after Charlie Spoonhour, the coach who recruited him, left the team three years ago. When the Rebels won the Mountain West tournament two weeks ago, Umeh's teammates allowed him to have the first snip of the championship net. "We know what he went through," says fellow senior Wendell White. "Everyone feels for Michael."

What he went through was knee surgery. Make that two knee surgeries, one on the left knee for chronic tendinitis and the other on the right knee for a patellar avulsion fracture.

Ever find yourself diagnosed with a patellar avulsion fracture? Didn't think so. Consider yourself lucky. Patellar avulsion means the tendon in your knee snaps off the bone. Patellar avulsion fracture means the tendon rips off part of the bone with it. It happened to Umeh after one of the best games of his career, a 20-point, five-assist game in December 2005. The Rebels were playing Southern Utah, and Umeh tried to cut. He heard a pop. Patellar avulsion fracture.

But get this: Umeh tried to play through the pain. Eventually, though, he had to have surgery because, on the court, he just wasn't himself. "It just hurt too much," he says.

In fact, even after surgery and rehab, Umeh has not really been himself. He is in the starting lineup, but he still battles knee soreness and starts mostly because of



Umeh's bad knees no longer hide his Ooooh-mazing athleticism.

his veteran presence, ballhandling and defense—yes, that was the 6-2 Umeh assigned to 6-6 All-American Alando Tucker. That's a far cry from the strong finish he had on offense in his sophomore year, when he averaged 14.5 points in the last 11 games and was dubbed "Michael Ooooh-mazing" by one local sportswriter. And from the start of his junior year, when he was averaging 14.1 points before the knee injury.

But something has happened to Umeh over the past two weeks. He put up 15 points and five assists in the Mountain West semifinals against Colorado State. He followed that by carrying UNLV to the conference tournament title with 18 points against BYU. In the Rebels' first two NCAA games, Umeh averaged 13.0 points and 4.5 rebounds. Umeh is getting close to Ooooh-mazing again.

"He is looking like he did a couple of years ago, when he had that athleticism," Kruger says. "It's funny because we talked a couple of weeks ago about it—if Michael Umeh is healthy, that is a totally new, added weapon for us."

That's a frightening prospect for Rebels opponents. UNLV is a tough veteran team that runs a four-guard set. What the team lacks in size, it makes up for in hustle and smarts; the Rebels are averaging just 11.2 turnovers but are forcing an average of 15.3. Against Wisconsin's stifling ball pressure, UNLV committed nine turnovers. Kevin Kruger, Lon's son, is the on-floor leader, and Wink Adams and White are the big scorers on the wings.

Umeh? He's the wild card. Kruger readily admits his team is subject to dreadful shooting nights, and that's where Umeh comes in. He can be the weapon the Rebels didn't know they still had.

"This has been great," Umeh says. "I feel like I am finally able to contribute. I am finally able to show what I am capable of." —Sean Devaney

The bad news:

Ski Patrol just closed the mountain.

The good news:
Ski Patrol just closed the mountain.

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The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less common are bluish or blurred vision, or being sensitive to light. These may occur for a brief time. Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases.

Please see our patient summary of information for VIAGRA (25 mg, 50 mg, 100 mg) tablets on the following page.

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*HMOs and PPOs; Some plans may require a prior authorization.

¹MediMedia Information Technologies, Formulary Compass™ August 2006.

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Never take VIAGRA if you take any medicines with nitrates. This includes nitroglycerin. Your blood pressure could drop quickly. It could fall to an unsafe or life-threatening level.

ABOUT ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

Erectile dysfunction means a man cannot get or keep an erection. Health problems, injury, or side effects of drugs may cause ED. The cause may not be known.

ABOUT VIAGRA

VIAGRA is used to treat ED in men. When you want to have sex, VIAGRA can help you get and keep an erection when you are sexually excited. You cannot get an erection just by taking the pill. Only your doctor can prescribe VIAGRA.

VIAGRA does not cure ED.

VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or HIV. You will need to use a condom.

VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

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Who should take VIAGRA?

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Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

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- If you use some street drugs, such as "poppers" (amyl nitrate or nitrite)
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablet.

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses.

The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Feeling flushed
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- Do not take more than 25 mg of VIAGRA within 4 hours of taking an alpha-blocker.
- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with your doctor.

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VGIF Rev 1, 12/06

Memphis has 32 wins and still plenty to prove

These Tigers are different than those Tigers, no doubt. Sure, these Memphis Tigers have piled up a top-heavy record and are accessorized with a gaudy seed—just like last year's version. This again is a team that tries to pulverize opponents with depth, size, athleticism and pressure defense. And, of course, John Calipari is still in charge.

But anyone who saw Memphis work its way through New Orleans last weekend, when it dispatched North Texas and Nevada to get a trip to the Sweet 16, can attest that these Tigers have different stripes. In a way, the two Memphis teams are like Beale Street and Bourbon Street. They are similar, just not the same.

"This year, we're way more unselfish," says sophomore Chris Douglas-Roberts. "No one is demanding the ball late in games. We were close last year, but this year we're more like a family."

Memphis lost its top three scorers: Rodney Carney, Darius Washington and Shawne Williams. But a starless world still can be bright. The Tigers lack an elite point guard—freshman Willie Kemp is talented but still finding his way, and junior Andre Allen is valuable but limited—but excel at ball movement.

The Tigers might not make nine passes on every possession as they did right after the opening tip against North Texas in the first round, but it is uncommon to see them force shots.

"The ball moves from hand to hand; it really doesn't stop with anyone," says Tigers assistant coach Derek Kellogg. "And even when someone goes one-on-one, it still is designed to get other guys shots."

Douglas-Roberts and Antonio Anderson, a pair of 6-6 sophomore wings, are superb at breaking down defenses with penetration, then finding teammates left open.

Of course, a system based on sharing works only in the presence of team-first players. "Any selfishness, you're finished," says Calipari. "Any bickering, you're finished."

Though all teams profess to be close, this one is in a literal sense. Nine players share a house, and the rest of the team lives across the street. The team eats dinner together almost every night, either at Memphis' training facility or at home, where the guys enjoy the cooking of Douglas-Roberts, whose specialty is baked chicken, and Kemp, who says he can whip up just about anything.

Whether it's going to movies, playing video games or catching a game on TV, these Tigers travel in a group.

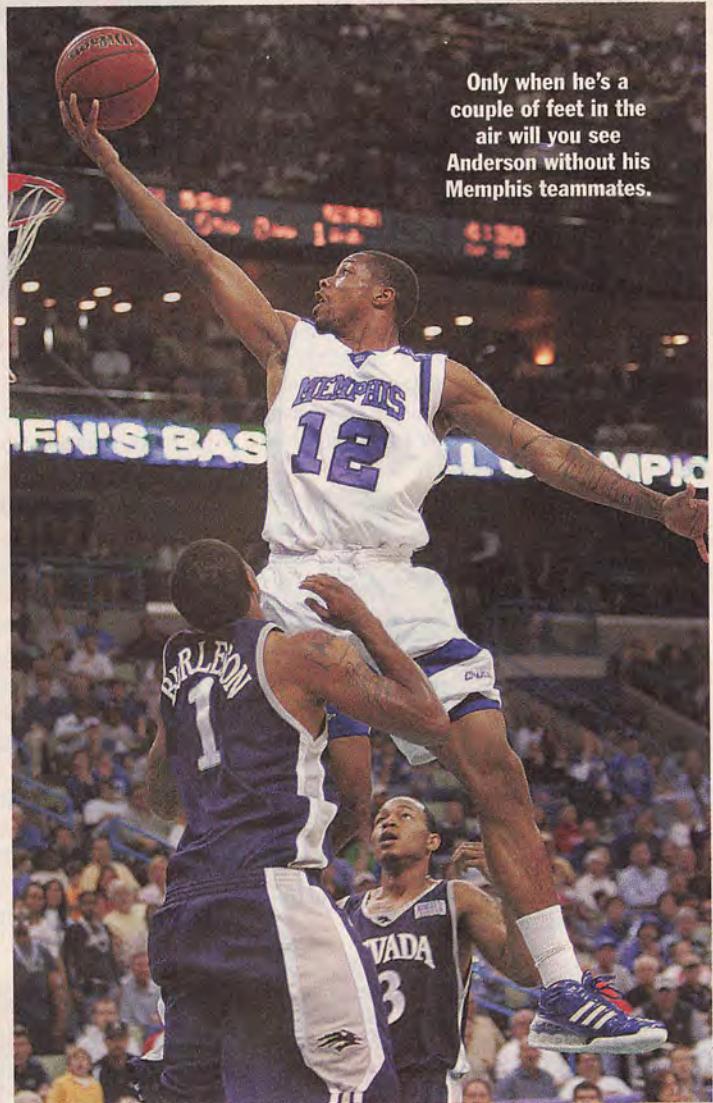
"If you see one of our guys," says Kellogg, "you probably will see 10 of them."

Opponents know the feeling. Kellogg orchestrates a dizzying substitution pattern that wears out the other team and the public address announcer equally. It's not just that Memphis will go 10 deep but that most players will log significant minutes. The Tigers apply relentless pressure to the ball and often defend full-court. They excel at deflecting passes, blocking shots, jumping passing lanes and creating turnovers. It helps, of course, that they are tall, long, fast and agile.

"I never have coached in an NBA game before," Nevada coach Mark Fox said after his team gained its second-round matchup with Memphis, "but I guess that's about to change."

Despite all that talent, Douglas-Roberts is the closest thing to a star, and now his status is in question after he sprained his ankle Sunday.

There also is the Conference USA thing. Because Memphis' league was so



BILL HABER / AP

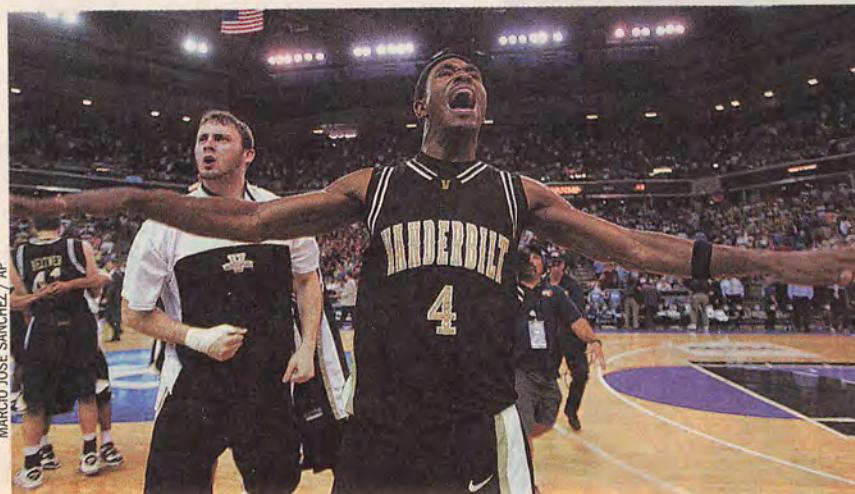
poor this season, some look at the Tigers' 32-3 record and No. 2 seed with skepticism. Tournament wins against North Texas and Nevada, from the Sun Belt and WAC, hardly changed that perception. The Tigers entered the tourney as perhaps the biggest mystery in the field, and in many ways they still are.

But as with any good mystery, you just have to read the clues. And they tell you that these Tigers can play a little. —*Kyle Veltrop*

THESE GUYS LOOK FAMILIAR

If you think you've seen some of this year's players in the Sweet 16 somewhere else before, you're probably right. Several players making contributions are transfers.

Name	From	To
Derrick Byars	Virginia	Vanderbilt
Mike Cook	East Carolina	Pitt
Patrick Ewing	Indiana	Georgetown
Kevin Kruger	Arizona State	UNLV
Ron Lewis	Bowling Green	Ohio State
Wes Miller	James Madison	North Carolina
Ross Neltner	LSU	Vanderbilt



MARIO JOSE SANCHEZ / AP

Ohio State doesn't need Oden to overcome

Ohio State is fortunate to have reached the Sweet 16, but the Buckeyes ought to have learned something from their near upset in the second round: They have the ability to play at a faster pace.

With All-American center Greg Oden fouled out at the start of overtime against Xavier, Ohio State turned on the speed. The Buckeyes scored 16 points in 5 minutes—a 128-points-per-game pace. That's the identity the team carried in the early part of the season, when Oden was missing as he recovered from wrist surgery.

Coach Thad Matta can use a five-small lineup in which every guy can beat his man off the dribble and hit 3-point shots. When Oden is out to rest or hide from foul trouble, using Ron Lewis, Mike Conley, Daequan Cook, Jamar Butler and David Lighty can change the nature of any game. —M.D.



AL BEHRMAN / AP

Oden is a game-changer; when he isn't in the game, the pace gets faster.

Q&A

presented by



KEITH SMART

March 30 will be the 20th anniversary of one of college basketball's most memorable moments, when Indiana beat Syracuse, 74-73, in the national championship game. Keith Smart, now an assistant coach for the Golden State Warriors, hit the game-winning shot with 5 seconds left.

SN: So how many times this month have you been asked about the shot?

SMART: There's not a day that goes by where you don't hear something that references that or, "What was it like playing for Coach Knight?"

SN: So, what was it like playing for Coach Knight?

SMART: I had a good time playing for Coach. I learned a lot about basketball; I learned a lot



BOB LEVERONE / SN

BLOG ALERT

Shedding his mask allowed Psycho-T to reveal his true identity.

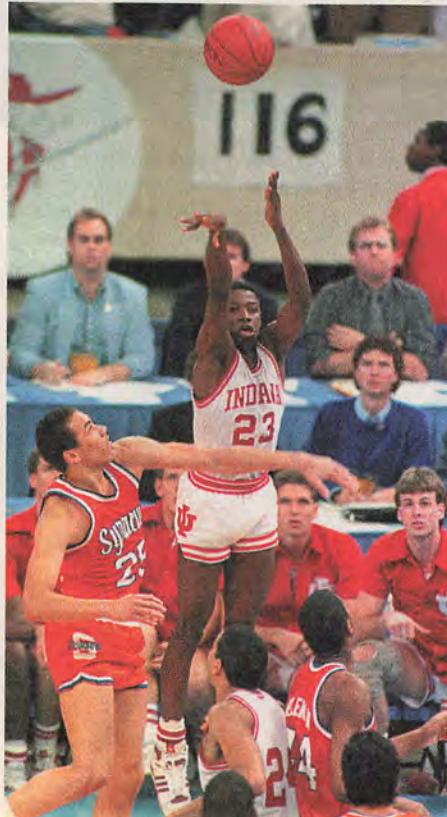
Tyler Hansbrough isn't the only one who can bring it—Mike DeCourcy is blogging like a madman throughout the NCAA Tournament. Get his thoughts—and share yours—at sportingnews.com/cbaskettball.

POWER POLL

Ohio State played poorly in its second-round victory. Florida wasn't that great. North Carolina was dominant only in the final few minutes. None of that matters now. They're still here, and they have the best chance to win the NCAA championship.

- 1. Ohio State.** Youth usually is tested most in the second round, but the Buckeyes still must grow up quickly.
- 2. Florida.** Think of all the costs that would be saved if the Gators skipped St. Louis and zipped on up to Atlanta.
- 3. North Carolina.** An unmasked Tyler Hansbrough helps, but there's a gear the Heels aren't finding.
- 4. Kansas.** Great news for KU—Brandon Rush is starting to shoot.
- 5. Texas A&M.** No title contender had a tougher second-round opponent. Is that an advantage?
- 6. Georgetown.** If somebody doesn't get in Roy Hibbert's way, the Hoyas will keep moving forward.
- 7. UCLA.** Concerns about Arron Afflalo's shooting slump drop the Bruins a couple notches.
- 8. Southern California.** It's not crazy to think this team could crash the Final Four.
- 9. Memphis.** The Tigers would be higher if Chris Douglas-Roberts had walked off the court in New Orleans.
- 10. UNLV.** If anybody but the Gators is getting out of the Midwest, it's these guys.
- 11. Oregon.** Shooting 3s can only take you so far—this far.
- 12. Pittsburgh.** At least UCLA doesn't employ a fullcourt press.
- 13. Tennessee.** Yes, the Vols played Ohio State before. Yes, it was close. Greg Oden was just getting started then.
- 14. Southern Illinois.** Can the Salukis slow Kansas to a crawl? Nah.
- 15. Butler.** This team's season already is close to perfect.
- 16. Vanderbilt.** The Commodores are better than when Georgetown first crushed them—but so is Georgetown.

—M.D.



about the game of life. He helped me out a whole lot with what I'm doing right now.

SN: You scored 12 of Indiana's last 15 points in the title game. How'd you end up with such a hot hand?

SMART: I was having a good tournament. My best game of the tournament was against Auburn. I scored 20 points, had 15 assists and nine rebounds. I had 21 points against Duke, and I played well against UNLV. Then I started to play well in the championship game—just from the confidence I had all year long and, most important, from what I had done within the tournament itself.

SN: With your NBA schedule, do you have a chance to follow the tourney much?

SMART: There is down time between our games, so you get a chance to watch some on TV or watch some recaps from the night before. Of course everyone has either played in college or been involved with it, so they continue to talk about their teams in the tournament, to debate a little bit. It's just a lot of fun, and that happens a lot throughout the NBA once the tournament starts. —Benson Taylor

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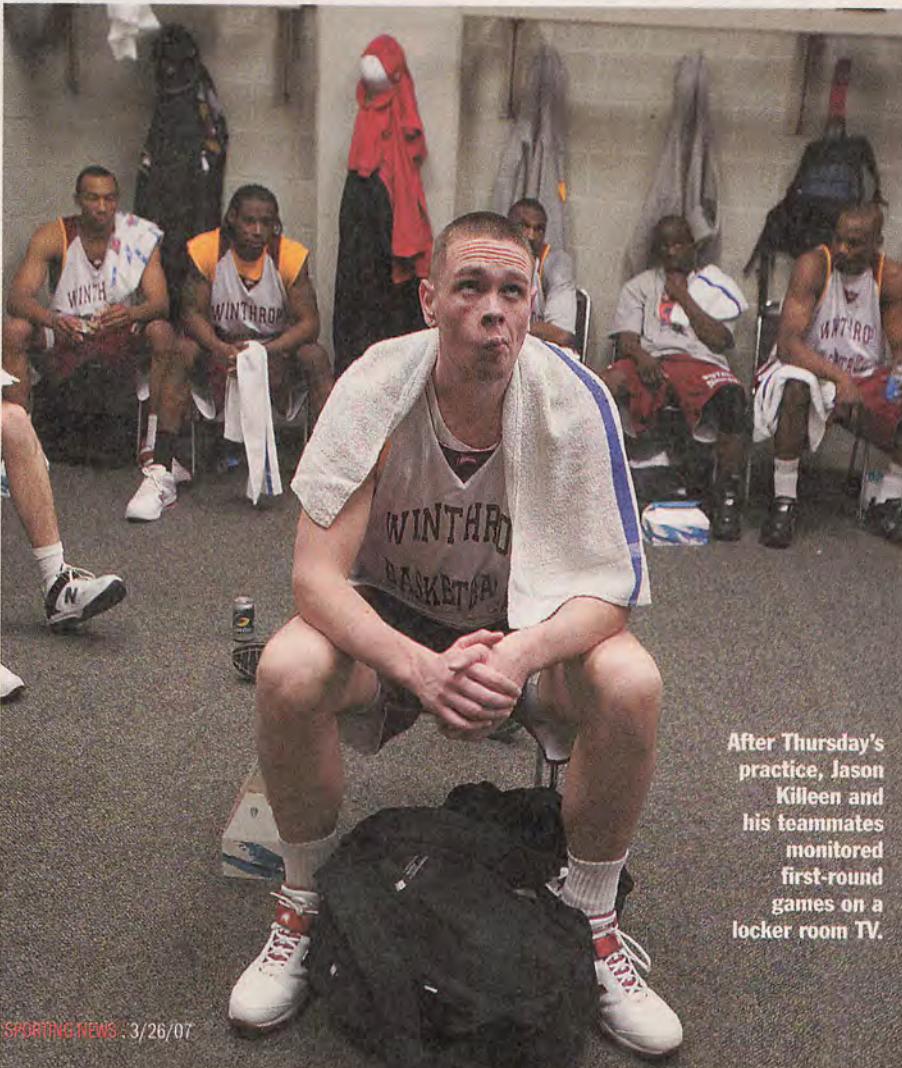
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INSIDE FIVE DAYS AT THE NCAAS

Where Eagles fly—and fall

You watch the games every day, all year long, but you don't get to see all that goes on behind the scenes—before, during and after. This week, grab your 22-page **ALL-ACCESS** pass and let us take you behind closed doors. First up: Join the Winthrop basketball team on its wild ride in the NCAA Tournament.

By Ryan Fagan / Photos by Jay Drowns



Spokane, Wash., is as far as you can get from Rock Hill, S.C., and still be in the NCAA Tournament—just ask *Rock Hill Herald* reporters Gary McCann and Andrew Dys, who drove all 2,638.9 miles to cover Winthrop—but for one weekend it was the Eagles who owned this town.

In the tournament's opening weekend, nearly devoid of big-time upsets, the Eagles' feel-good tale was the best story—from their "junkyard dogs" approach to Craig Bradshaw's New Zealand rugby upbringing to Torrell Martin's effervescent personality to the players' total confidence and belief in one another and what they were trying to accomplish.

The Eagles ultimately fell short of the Sweet 16, but for five days, they gave *SPORTING NEWS* a seat on the roller-coaster ride that included two days of preparation for a first-round upset, one day of preparation for what became a second-round loss and no preparation for heading back to Rock Hill with only next season ahead.

Wednesday

Redshirt freshman Anthony Williams shuffles gingerly around the edge of the practice court at Gonzaga's McCarthey Athletic Center with no idea where he left his gear. Truth be told, he can't even remember how he got to Gonzaga.

About a half-hour earlier, he had collided with Martin as the two were battling for a rebound in a hypercompetitive four-on-four drill. Both had hit the deck hard. Martin was fine, but Williams had suffered a minor concussion when the back of his head bounced off the hardwood. More than a couple of players and coaches had joked that at least this time blood wasn't spurting all over the court, an all-too-common scene at Eagles practices.

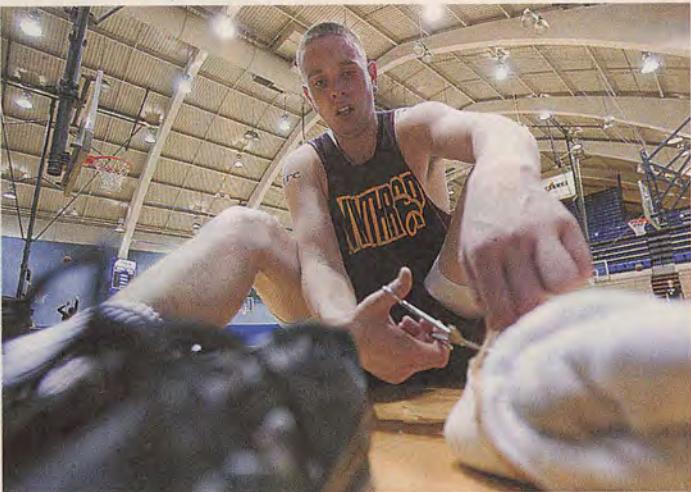
Winthrop basketball, in the nine years under coach Gregg Marshall, has been all about preparation—on the practice floor and in the film room. Two days before the 11th-seeded Eagles face sixth-seeded Notre Dame in the first round, Marshall lords over his team from center court and demands perfection. "Craig! You've got to be better than that. I'm gonna call you no-check Bradshaw. This is not the Big South. You've got to check him out."

"Johnny (Rice), I can't hear you. Michael Jenkins is working his ass off, and you can't communicate a screen? I'm just 6 feet away from you. You think that's gonna be good enough with 15,000 people in the stands Friday?"

This practice is all about fueling his players' competitive nature. After a 2-hour delay in the Charlotte airport and a cross-country flight, the team needed an uptempo, crash-the-boards session to get the juices flowing.



Wednesday brought its share of taped ankles, sore knees and sore heads, but there was time for a phone call or two and a few laughs at dinner.



Needed it almost as much as the get-stuffed dinner at Outback Steakhouse later that evening, especially after a mix-up prevented lunch from being included on the flight.

Thursday

Today, two days before St. Patrick's Day, is all about the Irish.

The 10:15 a.m. film session in the team hotel consists of 45 clips of a Notre Dame-St. John's game and lasts 30 minutes, which doesn't seem to do justice to the 15 hours of game tape the coaching staff has watched. Notre Dame is assistant Randy Peele's baby. Peele, who took UNC Greensboro to the NCAA Tournament as

its head coach in 1996, is one of the best in the scouting biz.

"I've got them down," Peele says later that night in a confident yet humble tone. Far from

a brash proclamation, this is a statement of truth from a veteran coach who flirts with the perfection of his craft. "I'm not saying that I have all the answers, but I've got them down. I know what they're trying to do."

Eighty percent of the film session emphasizes what the Irish do well, which is score.

They enter the tournament eighth in the nation on offense at 81.5 points per game. Senior wings Russell Carter and Colin Falls average 32.6 points combined, and freshman



Before heading to practice on the team bus, the Eagles made a memory.





With a day to go until tipoff, Marshall showed off his laser-pointing skills and the Eagles got to work out and sign a few autographs at Spokane Arena.

point guard Tory Jackson has been a spark since he took over when Kyle McAlarney was suspended at the end of December.

"Here's what Jackson can do," Marshall says. "Here's where he so good. He disrupts you. He's aggressive. See him get a piece of that pass?"

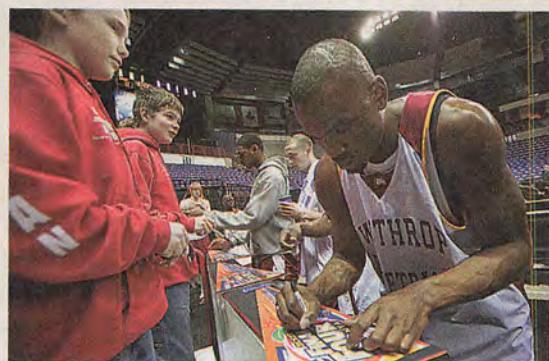
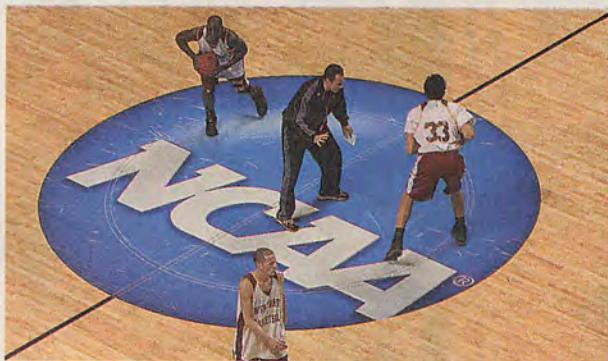
Marshall's laser pointer dances wildly across the projection screen. "Look. Backdoor there. They're great passers. Jackson to Falls, backcut. Boom. Great pass."

But Marshall's objective isn't to scare his players. The Irish have won 24 games, so they do plenty well. But, as Marshall points out, every team has a weakness.

"Watch. I wanted to show you this. Look. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Watch where they all end up on offense. All their guys within 10 feet of the basket. If we can rebound, men, there's all kinds of opportunities to score on the other end."

The coaches drill home three keys on defense—don't let Carter, Jackson or Zach Hillesland drive with his right hand; fight over screens to keep Falls from finding even an inch of room to shoot; and contest every shot Carter takes.

After a press conference and shootaround at Spokane Arena, the site for the games, the team takes a side trip to tiny Whitworth College for a practice that has yet



another purpose. "I've detected through my spies that they're feeling a little bit leg-weary, so I'm going to use a psychological ploy, and we're not going to do anything physical at all," Marshall says on the bus ride north. Instead, it will be more of a scouting practice, with Peele leading a walkthrough of a few more Notre Dame sets and tendencies.

As the Eagles arrive at Whitworth, the New Mexico State team is boarding its bus. Center Hatila Passos, one of the last Aggies to straggle out of the gym, watches the newcomers with a

quizzical look on his face. "What team is this?" he asks. Told it's Winthrop, his expression doesn't change. "Oh." The answer doesn't seem to help.

Friday

Michael Jenkins has to know. "What's with the smile?"

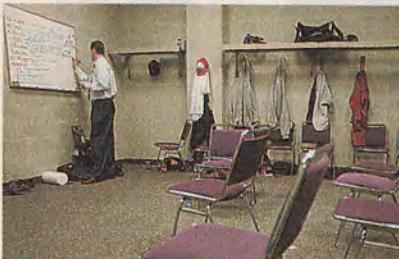
It is, after all, really early in the morning. Winthrop is a few hours from game time, and Jenkins' roommate, point guard Chris Gaynor, rolls out of bed with his pearly whites on full display.

Why the smile? Gaynor has spent the night dreaming of the Eagles' game against the Irish, and every time he saw the scoreboard, Winthrop was winning. Sometimes by a lot, sometimes by a little, but always winning.

"Coach told us to dream big last night, and I definitely dreamed big," Gaynor says.

He still was flashing that grin in the locker room after the Eagles beat the Irish, 74-64.

The execution based on the scouting report was practically flawless. Jenkins fought the screens, stayed step-for-step with Falls and held him to 2-for-10 3-point shooting. Martin kept



Marshall got his team ready for Friday's game after tucking his copy of *The Art of War* under his cell phone and setting out the wrestling action figure given to the player of the game. Martin (12) must have wanted that doll; he had 20 points, 11 rebounds and at least one moment of postgame celebration.





The team's support staff checked out Saturday's games in their hotel room, while Jenkins kept the hotel's staff busy with a little laundry.



his hand in Carter's face, and Carter missed all six of his 3s. Gaynor and De'Andre Adams didn't allow Jackson to drive right, and Jackson was 1-for-8 on 2-point attempts.

"The players allow us to pound that into them as coaches," Marshall says. "They're receptive to coaching, and it all works well together because of the type of kids we have and how hard my coaches work."

The team party, with Winthrop president Dr. Anthony DiGiorgio as the host, is set for 5:30 p.m., win or lose, back at the hotel. It has been like that each of the seven years the Eagles have reached the tournament under Marshall, and every time the fans, coaches and players have celebrated the end to a good season. Until now. This time it can't be a long celebration—a mere 45 minutes—for the coaching staff. With about 40 hours until the Eagles' second-round date with No. 3 seed Oregon, it's back to scouting.

The coaches watch film from 6:15 to 10 p.m., when the players join them for a quick 30-clip scouting session from Oregon's first-round win over Miami (Ohio).

Saturday

Marshall sits behind the projector, working through a 99-cent bag of sunflower seeds. Not employing the handful-in-the-cheek style baseball players have perfected, he gnaws at each one individually. He chimes in, but assistant coach Earl Grant, who scouted Oregon, is running this film session, the second of the day and last one before the Eagles take on Oregon tomorrow morning.

Only insiders are allowed at their practice this afternoon, when the Eagles spend time learning how to deal with the Ducks' matchup zone and how to limit Oregon's dynamite transition game. The plan is to take smart shots, then send three guys to the boards and immediately drop two back to defend. That probably will cost Winthrop a few offensive rebounds, but the strategy is designed to limit the Ducks' fast-break opportunities. In a half-court game, Grant believes his Eagles have the athleticism to stop any of the limited number



of sets that Oregon uses—about four or five, he says after watching several games on film.

"We've got a chance to do something special," Grant tells his players. "You think about that tonight. All I know is about the guys in this room, the kind of guys we've got and the

type of coaches we've got. If we go as a family tomorrow, on the same page, and think about what we've got to do, we'll be going to St. Louis."

Sunday

Sometimes, not even the best of game plans can shut down elite talent. Lightning-quick Oregon guards Aaron Brooks and Tajuan Porter went a combined 9-for-17 from 3-point range—often way, way beyond 3-point range—and sparked the Ducks to a 75-61 win.

The Eagles limited their bad shots and kept Oregon's transition game in check during the first half, but 11 turnovers and Brooks' three 3-pointers gave the Ducks a halftime lead. Winthrop kept sending two players back to slow Oregon, but Porter's 11 points in the first 4:01 of the second half pushed the lead into double digits.

"You can only hope to contain guys like him," Martin says. "There's no way you're going to stop them."

Sitting on a chair in the middle of the locker room, Marshall stares blankly at the stat sheet as he contemplates his team's exit from the tournament. "I just hate to see it end. We've had a lot of fun here, had a lot of good things happen," he says. "And when it ends, it ends abruptly."

Still, it is a ride to remember.

SN



Winthrop's five days of fun ended with a solemn moment in the locker room after Sunday's loss to Oregon. 'When it ends, it ends abruptly,' Marshall said.



Up close and personal

Find out why Calvin Johnson doesn't talk trash, what Zach Miller does in his spare time—and who has the best handshake in the draft *By Dan Pompei*

Room 141 in the Indianapolis Crowne Plaza Hotel. Four men sit at a circular table. Behind them, the headboards are still there—attached to the wall—but the beds and other regular room furniture are gone, replaced by standard banquet room stuff.

Falcons owner Arthur Blank, coach Bobby Petrino, director of college scouting Phil Emery and general manager Rich McKay stand when Georgia Tech receiver Calvin Johnson walks in with Falcons scout Taylor Morton.

At 6-4, Johnson easily is the tallest man in the room. He makes eye contact with each person, shakes his hand and says hello.

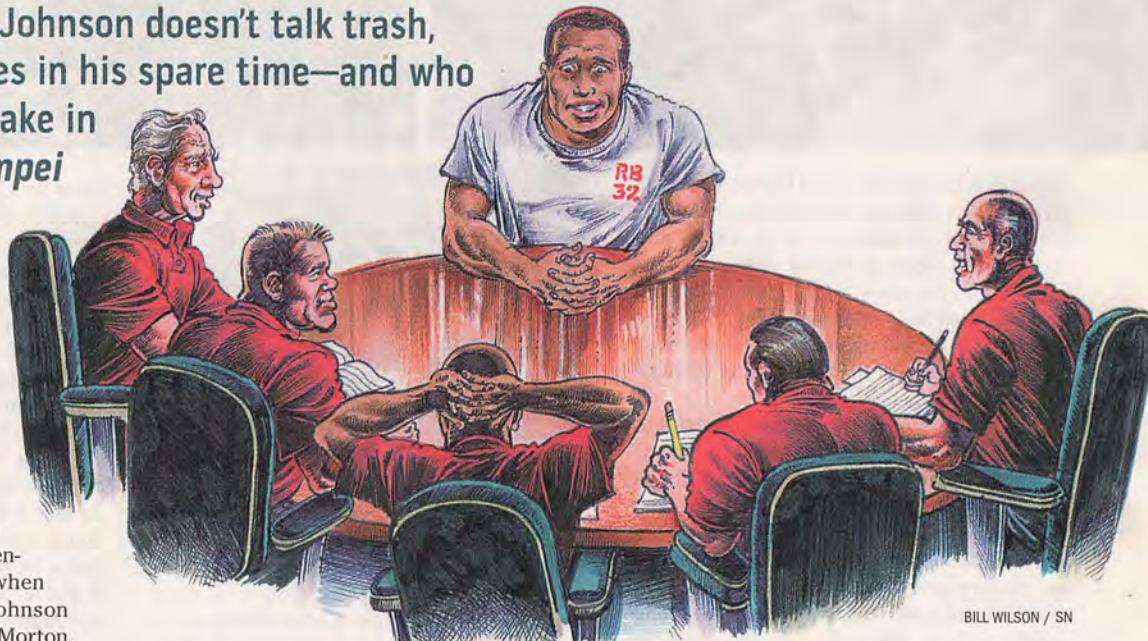
"We're going to be easy on you," Emery says. "Relax."

The Falcons are doing what every NFL team is doing this night: interviewing draft prospects at the Scouting Combine.

This is an organized process. Each team turns in an interview wish list 12 days before the Combine. The list cannot exceed 60 players. Each player requested is scheduled into a 15-minute time slot over a five-day period. Twelve minutes into the interview, an air horn blows twice—the 3-minute warning. At 15 minutes, the air horn blows once and the player must leave and meet a representative from another team who is waiting for him outside the door.

The most significant aspect of the interview process for the Falcons is seeing how each player presents himself in a job interview situation. "You get a feel for a player's maturity level and how he handles himself under pressure," Emery says. "You can see if he has passion for the game. They can't fake that."

At one point, Blank asks Oklahoma running back Adrian Peterson how others would describe his strengths and weaknesses. Peterson talks with sincerity about how much



he loves playing, how he's willing to sacrifice for his teammates and how he'll do the dirty work. He is convincing, and he has passed a significant test.

For Blank, the interviews are important enough for him to fly to Indianapolis on his private jet and take part in the process for two nights. "When you hear the stories directly from them, you get an understanding of the emotions and the impact the issues they have faced have had on their lives," Blank says.

The Falcons spend most of their 15 minutes with Peterson discussing family and personal issues—from his witnessing the accident that took his 9-year-old brother's life when Peterson was 7 to his father's incarceration to Peterson's scrapes with the law. As time expires, they ask Peterson if he can come back later so they can talk some football, and he says he will.

The Falcons work off a printed form with six sections of question topics. The first section—and perhaps the most significant—is entitled *Family/Support*. "First, we want to know about his family background, how stable he is, his support structure," Emery says. "Who is involved with him financially? Are there people depending on him? Does he come from a one-parent home? If

he has a problem, who does he go to? We might need to put our player programs director on him, or we might need to pair him with a veteran who can be a good influence."

They ask Johnson who was involved in his decision to attend Georgia Tech. (His parents and himself.) Is he single? (Yes.) Any kids? (No.) They want to know about his roommates in college and whom else he hung out with.

It might seem odd that the Falcons want to know so much about a player they likely won't get close enough to sniff in the draft. Johnson is expected to be selected no lower than fourth overall. The Falcons have the 10th pick.

"You can't look at everybody, but at the positions you may have a need—where you

There are no filters on the questions. It's the chance to broach topics players would not discuss in any other forum.

might even consider making a pick—you owe it to yourself to do everything possible," McKay says. "You never know what will happen on draft day."

And no one can predict what will happen a few years from now. If Johnson becomes a free agent or is on the trading block, the Falcons

will have an extensive file on him.

The interview is an opportunity to broach sensitive topics most players would not discuss in any other forum. There are no filters.

Scout Mark Olson to Arizona State tight end Zach Miller: "Ever miss a game for a team suspension?"

Miller: "No. Never failed any drug tests, either."

Olson: "No steroids?"

Miller: "No."

Morton to Johnson: "Any off-the-field issues we should know about, going back to high school as far as arrests, DUIs, things that would embarrass us?"

Johnson: "No."

Blank, lightening the mood with a smile and a laugh: "Did you ever get in trouble with your mother or father?"

Smiles are a part of almost every interview. When Miller walks in the room with a Vikings shirt in his hand, he is razzed. Olson says, "We'll give him a better shirt."

Minutes later, the Falcons find out Miller likes to watch movies and play Xbox.

Atlanta's assistant coaches will meet with the players separately. Their interviews are more about the technical aspects of the game. In all, any given player might have four separate sessions with different Falcons representatives. Altogether, the team will conduct close to 300 interviews at the Combine.

Even in the group interviews, the Falcons try to get a feel for the players' on-field personalities. The Falcons hammer Johnson on whether he ever felt he didn't get the ball enough. (Yes, in maybe four games last season.) How did he respond? (By telling coaches on the sideline he was getting open on certain routes and by committing himself to blocking.) What was his relationship with Georgia Tech quarterback Reggie Ball? (They didn't hang out, but they were cool.) What is his favorite route? (Skinny post.) How many practices did he miss last season? (Seven.)

"You're going to have DBs talk to you, try to intimidate you," Petrino says. "How do you handle that?" Johnson: "I don't talk trash. I don't waste time doing that. I had a lot of trash talked to me. I don't give any fuel to their fire."

Emery was told by the late Mark Hatley, a longtime NFL personnel man, that he can learn everything he needs to know from game tape. But if there are questions about what he has seen on tape, the interview is the time to get answers.

For instance, Emery asks Peterson why he was running up the backs of blockers in a game against Nebraska in 2005. Peterson says his coach told him that if blockers are in his way, he should run into them as hard as he can. That way, they'll get out of the way next time.

When the horn blows and Peterson's time is up, he shakes hands with perhaps the most impressive grip of the draft. McKay says, "Work on that handshake, will you?" SN

INSIDE LEBRON'S HUMMER

Fit—and customized—for a king

As the owner of Unique Autosports on Long Island, Will Castro has customized cars for famous athletes such as Jermaine O'Neal, Gary Sheffield, Tony Stewart and Yao Ming.

In the case of LeBron James, Castro got to work with a famous athlete and a famous car—the 2003 Hummer H2 James received from his mother for his 18th birthday. The vehicle raised some suspicion, but the Ohio High School Athletic Association found nothing unseemly after investigating whether James had violated his amateur status by accepting an improper gift.

Castro was doing some work on a Jaguar for James last offseason when James mentioned he planned to get rid of his Hummer. "I was like, 'I remember that Hummer; that thing was popular,'" says Castro, who asked James if he could work his magic on the car for *Unique Whips*, the show Castro hosts on Speed. "This is a famous Hummer, but it had gotten a little tired, a little beat up. It was cool we could bring it back to life." —*Kyle Veltrop*



BOB LEVERONE / SN
James



The Hummer, originally a platinum color, got a triple-black paint job. "A very expensive German paint," Castro says. The interior also was redone in black.

The 20-inch rims with spinners were outdated, so James upgraded to 30-inch TIS wheels and a unique edition of Pirelli tires.

The *Unique* gang replaced the bench seats in the middle and back rows with two customized limo seats in the back. NBA players, such as the 6-8 James or the 7-5 Yao, appreciate the extra leg room. "We customized a 760 BMW for Yao," Castro says. "We took measurements on everything—from kneecaps to heels, from his waist to his legs, from the gas pedal to the brake pedal. I thought I was a tailor."

James is a big gadget guy, so the crew installed a computer system and a 10-inch monitor on the ceiling. With a wireless keyboard, James can go to the Internet, download satellite TV or use the computer as an AM/FM tuner or a navigation system. The monitors in the two headrests facing the backseat are for viewing DVDs.



The new JBL stereo system has multiple amplifiers, a couple of woofers and 14 speakers. A 10-inch monitor in the front dash controls the radio system. *Unique* created a "King James" logo to personalize the system.

INSIDE DRIVING A ZAMBONI

Smooth moves

You've seen it roll onto a rough sheet of ice and leave it smooth and glistening. You've heard stories of it being taken to the street for an 8-mph joy ride. You've sung the lyrics to its song—and if you haven't, you should (*Google Gear Daddies*).

But before climbing into the driver's seat, it helps to know how a Zamboni works.

A sharp blade shaves a thin layer of ice from the surface, a horizontal auger collects the shavings and a vertical auger moves them to the snow tank. Water from a separate wash-water tank goes to the conditioner; this water is sprayed onto the ice to clean the surface, then vacuumed, filtered and returned to the tank. Clean, warm water is then spread on the ice by a long towel located behind the conditioner.

Tom Walters, who has been resurfacing the ice at the Islanders' Nassau Coliseum for five years, offers his list of do's and don'ts for driving a Zamboni.

Do ...

- Know the temperature and humidity of the building and the ice depth.
- Get the edge of the conditioner right against the boards.
- Always start at the same spot on the ice.
- Stand if you must, but make sure you can see.
- Get special training.

Don't ...

- Hit the wall.
- Lift the blade too early or too late when leaving the ice.
- Forget to clean and refill the tanks between jobs.
- Use too much water.
- Run over anyone.

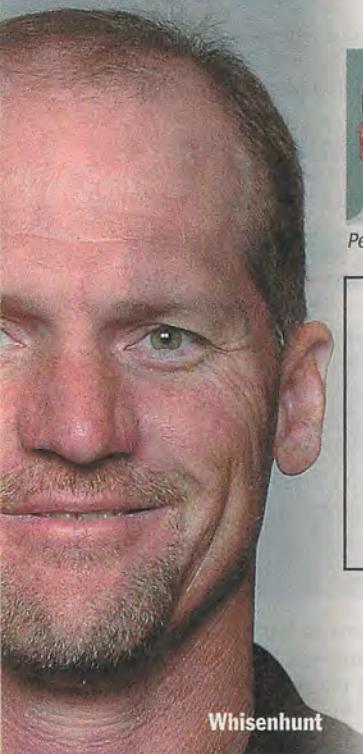
—Kara Yorio



After all these years, the Zamboni is still just scratching the surface.

INSIDE HIRING AN NFL STAFF

Needed: more than a few good



Pendergast



Courtright



Spencer



Lott



Austin



Davis

1 After moving from Steelers offensive coordinator to coach of the Cardinals on January 14, Whisenhunt's first step is to meet with seven coaches left from Dennis Green's staff. He is retaining two—defensive coordinator Clancy Pendergast and defensive assistant Rick Courtright.

2 Next, Whisenhunt seeks permission from the Steelers to talk to receivers coach Bruce Arians (his first choice for offensive coordinator), linebackers coach Keith Butler and special teams coach Kevin Spencer. Whisenhunt gets a maybe on Arians, a no on Butler and a yes on Spencer.

3 Whisenhunt hires Spencer as special teams coach. "Anybody who can work for Bill Cowher as a special teams coach for five years is good enough to coach for me," Whisenhunt says, laughing.

4 Whisenhunt hires former Browns strength coach John Lott, with whom he worked on the Jets' staff in 2000. "I've seen his success in the weight room," says Whisenhunt, "so I felt very comfortable about that."

5 His offensive staff on hold, Whisenhunt focuses on defense. He hires Seahawks secondary coach Teryl Austin and former 49ers defensive coordinator Billy Davis, both of whom can provide insight on division rivals. He names Davis linebackers coach and promotes defensive assistant Courtright to assistant defensive backs coach.

6 When the Steelers refuse to let Arians out of his contract, Whisenhunt turns to his next two options: Cowboys receivers coach Todd Haley and Eagles quarterbacks coach Pat Shurmur. He has to wait to talk to Haley until after Bill Parcells retires, but he interviews Shurmur at the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala.

INSIDE THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Heart is his first language

How the World Series MVP pulled together *Have Heart*, an inspirational book about overcoming odds in baseball—and life

By David Eckstein

This is my story and I want it in my words, but writing is not my work whatsoever. This truly has been a family project—from the writing to the publishing to the promoting. My mom is a reading coach, one of my brothers, Ken, was an English major, and one of my sisters, Christine, is an elementary school teacher. They would write something and e-mail it to me, and I would make sure it was accurate. I've been over every page with a fine-toothed comb, but let's say having the help of my family made everything grammatically correct.

The first edition was done with (ghostwriter) Greg Brown after the Angels won the World Series in 2002, but he sold his company to a group that made some bad decisions. The contract said if the book sold out and the company couldn't get it back on the shelves in 60 days, the book would become mine. The company could not get it back on the shelves, and, after a lot of legal proceedings, I gained rights to the book. Now I am involved in every facet of the book.

After the World Series, we bunkered down for three days—I slept about eight hours over those three days—to get the final part done so we could get the book out as

quickly as possible. Considering we originally were hoping to come out with the second editions after the '05 season, we were fortunate the timing worked out like it did.

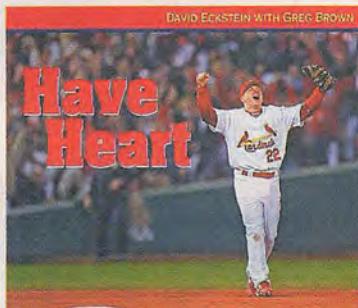
In the first edition, there is a picture of Mickey Mouse and me out of Disney's Dreamers and Doers program. At the time, I was in Anaheim and Disney still owned the Angels, so they said it could go in the book. This time, Disney said no. Instead of going through all the hoops it would have taken to use the photo, we just took it out.

Fans really can grab on to what you write. In the first edition, I had something about how I like chicken teriyaki as part of my pregame ritual, but I took it out this time because fans

always were asking me, 'Have you had your chicken teriyaki today?'

You're not going to see me trying for The New York Times best-seller list for fiction. I'm planning a three-part DVD series next.

As told to Stan McNeal. Proceeds from *Have Heart* go to charities supported by Eckstein. For more information, visit davideckstein.com.



Forget the Series title—Eck knows the joy of a well-crafted sentence.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

men

OK, Ken Whisenhunt, you finally have your chance to be an NFL head coach. Now comes the hard part: assembling a staff. Sure, you've got a plan, and you can start with that evolving list of candidates you've kept on your computer. But you're going to need patience, timing, luck—and oh, yeah, the fortitude to fire a hire because of a shocking development.



Grimm



Haley



Rutledge

Whisenhunt is granted permission to talk to Haley and quickly hires him as offensive coordinator. He has had Jeff Rutledge or Don Strock in mind to coach the quarterbacks—he talked to

both at the Senior Bowl but wanted to wait until he had a coordinator in place—and selects Rutledge.

7

After Mike Tomlin is named coach of the Steelers, Whisenhunt hires former Pittsburgh colleague Russ Grimm as assistant head coach/offensive line. "I knew if I had a chance to get a good line coach, that was important," Whisenhunt says.

8

Whisenhunt hires two more offensive assistants in late January: former Browns offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon, as running backs coach, and former Jets tight ends coach Richie Anderson. A few days later, Whisenhunt adds former Cowboys tight ends coach Freddie Kitchens and switches Anderson to receivers coach.



Carthon



Anderson



Kitchens

10

Mike Miller and Matt Raich sign on as offensive and defensive assistants. Miller worked in Buffalo with former Bills coach Mike Mularkey, one of Whisenhunt's best friends. Raich was Whisenhunt's assistant the past three years in Pittsburgh.



Miller



Raich

11



Aiken

Whisenhunt initially had three names in mind for defensive line coach: Wayne Nunnelly of the Chargers, Bryan Cox of the Jets and Dan Quinn of the Dolphins. After failing to land any, he turns to Iowa defensive line coach Ron Aiken. But Aiken is afraid he'll lose some recruits if word gets out he is interviewing for another job. After national signing day February 7, Aiken is brought in and gets the job.

12

Just when his staff appears set, Whisenhunt is thrown a curve. Anderson is arrested in early March for allegedly soliciting an undercover police officer posing as a prostitute as part of a sting operation. Whisenhunt fires him.

And the carousel continues turning. —Dennis Dillon

Listen the (bleep) up!

Join the Hawks at halftime, but leave your sensitivity at the door. Emotions run high, criticisms cut deep—and they're winning for crying out loud. *By Sean Deveney*

Lorenzen Wright is angry. He grabs a black marker and approaches the dry-erase board in the Hawks' locker room at Philips Arena in Atlanta. "Guards," he says, drawing an "O" on the board, followed by an "X" with a squiggly arrow. "You've got to do a better job. Their guards are coming right down the (bleeping) lane, and you're leaving me to deal with them."

Wright goes on. The rest of the Hawks are seated at their lockers, silent. "You have got to run the (bleep) down there and push him. Get in his (bleeping) way. Do something. The (bleeper) is not that (bleeping) good."

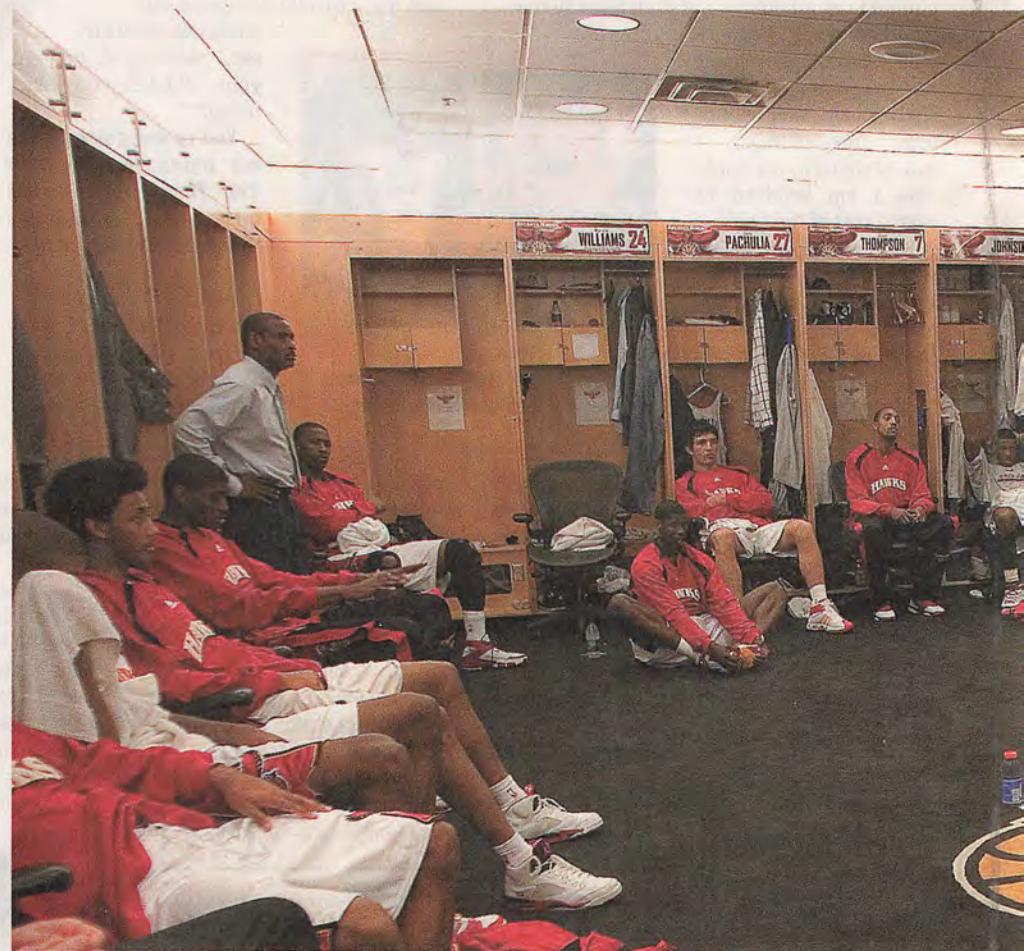
Wright is emotional, though his voice remains steady. He's a veteran. He is nearing 750 NBA games played over 11 seasons. He knows when he is not getting the kind of help he needs from teammates. His choice of language is foul enough to make a hardened biker blush—it's not the language fans or media are accustomed to hearing from Wright.

But this isn't meant for any larger audience than Wright and his teammates. This is halftime in an NBA locker room.

"We gotta (bleeping) play," Wright says. "I can't box my man out and go after the (bleeping) shot at the same time. I am trying to help. Help me."

Wright is right. Throughout the second quarter of the Hawks' game against the Celtics—a Martin Luther King Day meeting between struggling young teams—Boston's guards sliced past Atlanta's perimeter defense. Wright was left to decide between challenging shots and sticking with his man. Four times in a 4-minute span in the second quarter, Wright watched Rajon Rondo or Gerald Green score at the rim. Twice, Al Jefferson—Wright's man—was alone for follow-up tip-ins because Wright was forced to help elsewhere.

Those breakdowns have kept Atlanta from blowing out the Celtics, who are without star Paul Pierce and two other starters: Wally Szczerbiak and Delonte West. The Hawks built a 12-point lead, but the Celtics have cut it to 47-40.



Wright's tongue-lashing is just the first part of a ritual that will take place 2,460 times this season in locker rooms around the NBA. Halftime is 15 minutes: short and intense. Once Wright is done talking, the players sit somber and silent—during a game they're *winning*—while coach Mike Woodson meets with his assistants in his office. After about five minutes, Woodson enters the room and asks, "Everybody in?"

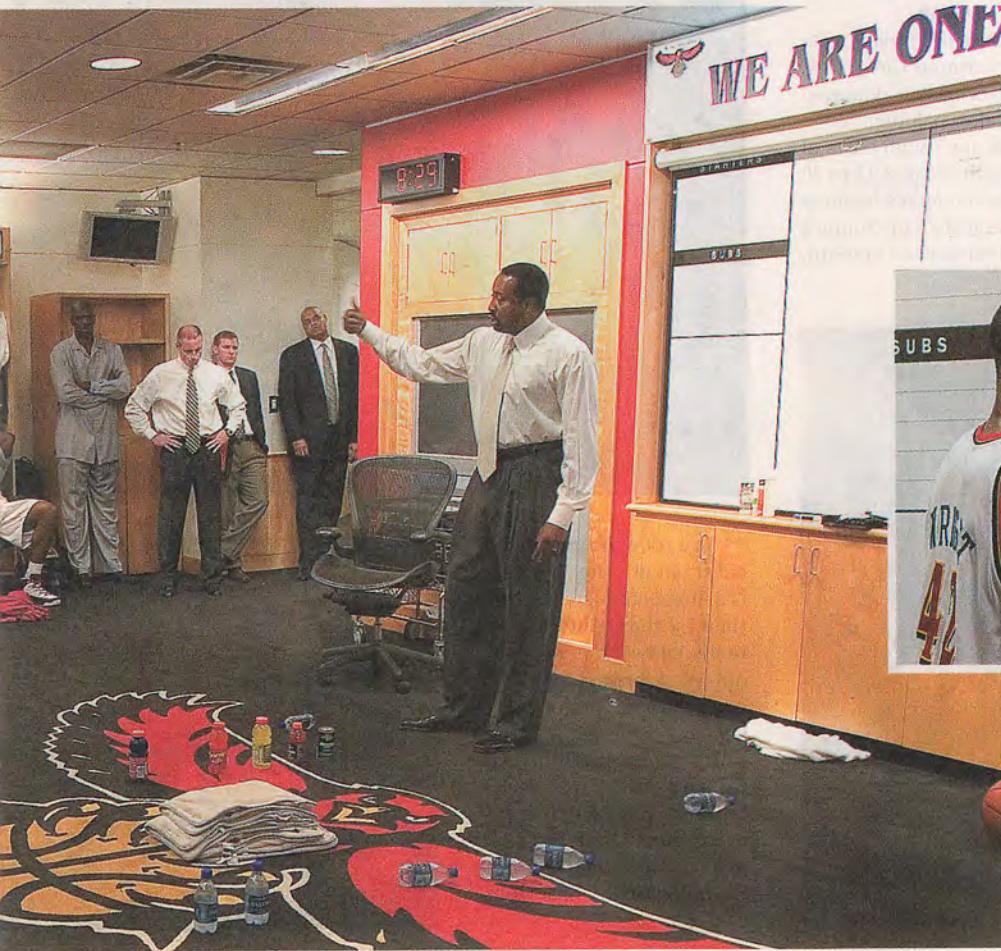
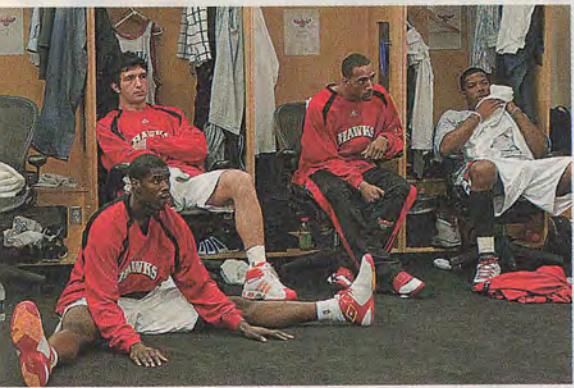
"Salim (Stoudamire) is on the toilet," says

injured guard Tyronn Lue, dressed in a suit and stifling a smirk. "Diarrhea or something."

Woodson knows he needs to use every opportunity to teach. These halftime minutes are especially useful. Players are rapt. Standing before his team at the dry-erase board—Woodson missed Wright's earlier diatribe and quickly rubs out his squiggly arrow—Woodson draws five X's. "Shelden," he says, speaking to rookie Shelden Williams, "this is for you."

Woodson goes on to criticize Williams'

Woodson's critical observations and Wright's profanity-laced outburst leave a captivated audience speechless.



execution of the Hawks' zone defense. Williams has been failing to fill the gap when the Hawks' guards get picked. Williams offers up a defense. "I did that the second time," he says, "and Allan Ray got on the baseline. I wound up picking up a foul."

"We did it right one time," Woodson says, sternly. "Just do it right and it won't matter."

The clock is ticking—about 8 minutes left in halftime—and the players will soon return to the court for warmups. There is more to be

said. Woodson addresses Joe Johnson about the Celtics' full-court pressure. "Joe, they are doing a 2-2-1 press, and I am telling you, the wings are open. When they do that, middle men, don't leave your spots and the wings will be open. Follow me?" Johnson nods.

Assistant coach Herb Brown speaks up. He didn't hear Wright, either. "Guys, Jefferson had four tip-ins," he says. "You have got to do more to help Lorenzen and the guys in the middle."

Woodson has more. The Hawks, he says, had the Celtics in the penalty and should have taken better advantage by driving to the basket and drawing fouls. He tells second-year forward Marvin Williams to communicate better on defense. He raises his voice and says, "And for guys who can't dunk the ball, lay it in! It is still two points!"

That is for Stoudamire. With 3 seconds left in the first quarter, he slammed the ball off the back of the rim. Williams says to Stoudamire, "That (bleep) was stupid, Salim."

"I know," Stoudamire says. "I cocked it back too far."

Woodson closes with this: "Guys, look, we have got to come out and pounce on this team. We had them down, and we let them back in. Do not give them even a chance this time."

Of course, even the best halftime teaching sometimes goes unheeded. On the Celtics' first possession, the Hawks allow Jefferson his fifth tip-in. But for the rest of the third quarter, Hawks guards take Wright's advice and play more aggressively on Boston's perimeter players. The Celtics' guards take 12 third quarter shots, but only two are layups. Both are misses.

But shutting down the lane has worked too well because Boston is hot from 3-point range

and makes seven of 10 second half attempts. The Hawks lead by three with just under 4 minutes in the game. After a blocked shot, the Hawks have a 3-on-1 break and Woodson's halftime words come to mind: "Lay it in!" Instead, the Hawks try an alley-oop pass to Josh Smith, who misses a dunk attempt. Woodson shakes his head and appears to be grinding his teeth into dust.

The Hawks win, 100-96, but anyone who saw Woodson during halftime knows the botched fast break is still heavy on his mind. "That was unnecessary," he says. "You do that when you are up 20, not when you are up three. That is a sign of young guys just playing basketball and not really knowing the nuts and bolts of the game."

The play will provide another opportunity for Woodson to teach those nuts and bolts. And next time he says, "Lay it in!" at halftime, perhaps his players will listen. **SN**

INSIDE THE PERFECT PAINT JOB

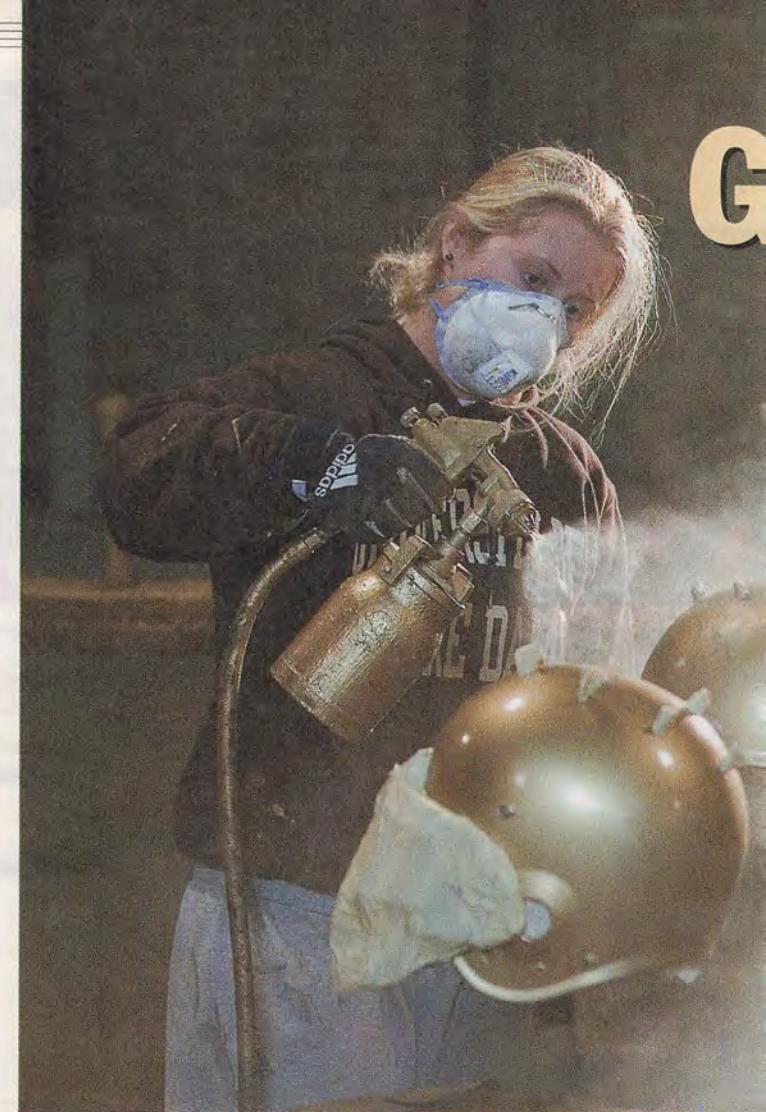
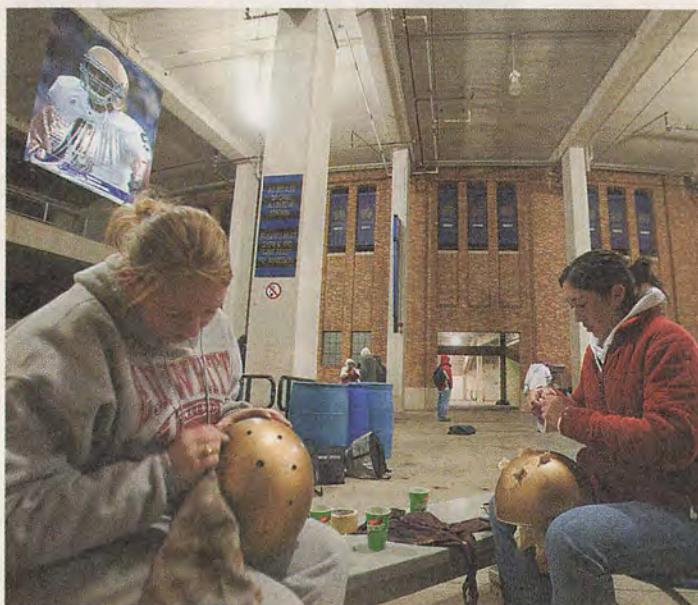
1 At about 2:45 p.m. on Mondays, 100 or so sophomore student managers arrive at Gate E of Notre Dame Stadium to find helmets—105 if it's a home game, 60 if it's an away game—in rows, ready to be taped and buffed.



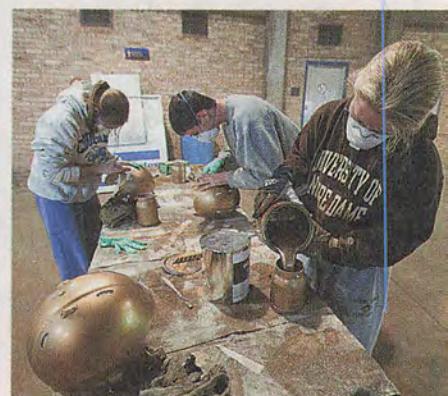
2 The managers work in the stadium, so they're under a roof, but that's the only protection they get from the weather. Sweatshirts, gloves and hats are a necessity for buffing and taping helmets in late fall.

Managers start by taping helmets so only the outside of each gets painted. Before the taping, they wrap Saran Wrap around the grilles, which makes it easier to remove the tape later. If a facemask is damaged or is a special style, it is removed and then replaced after painting.

Next, managers use rags and paint thinner to buff the rough parts of each helmet so the new coat of paint will go on smooth. It takes 15 to 20 minutes to tape and buff each helmet, although the linemen's helmets take longer. After one game last season, offensive tackle Sam Young's helmet took more than an hour to buff. Once the helmets are smooth, they are taken to junior managers to be inspected.



3 In a room deeper in the stadium, the helmets are inspected again, this time by the painters. "We really know what we want out of a helmet when it comes back," junior manager Biz Stohl says. "It's a Notre Dame tradition, so we want to keep it perfect." Stohl is one of two managers who paint the helmets. ("That's me, in front. I'm filling up my base coat can," she says.)



What's in your goody bag?

Thanks for coming, boys. We've got a little something for you to remember us by. There's a portable XM Satellite radio, a commemorative Tourneau wristwatch and a bunch of munchies. Enjoy.

That's what the Florida and Ohio State players received for playing in the BCS championship game in Glendale, Ariz. Take a look inside the goody bags from other bowl games and decide which parting gifts were worth parting with.



■ Helen of Troy hair

dryers

To: Missouri and Oregon

State players

From: Sun Bowl

ood as gold



Every Monday during the season, student managers gather in the bowels of Notre Dame Stadium for a labor of love:

painting helmets for the football team.

Nothing short of immaculate will do.

By Jessica Daves • Photos by Jay Drowns

4 The helmet's first coat of paint is a dull color called Real ND Gold. The paint settles like a fog, and gold ends up on everything—shirts, pants, shoes. Stohl, the base coat painter, has a "uniform"

she wears while painting. "My sweatshirt is pretty much ruined because my entire left sleeve is gold," she says.

It takes about five hours to paint the helmets—a long time to hold a heavy spray gun and bucket. "It's not a matter of how long I have to paint if my muscles are sore," Stohl says. "If you really love Notre Dame, you put the rest aside."



■ George Foreman grills

To: Oklahoma State and Alabama players

From: Independence Bowl

■ Swiss Army watches

To: Clemson and Kentucky players

From: Music City Bowl



■ 15-inch flat-screen TVs with DVD players

To: Maryland and Purdue players

From: Champs Sports Bowl

■ Chick-fil-A watches and calendars

To: Georgia and Virginia Tech players

From: Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl



5 The final step is spraying a clear gloss onto the helmets. There's something special in the gloss—three to four teaspoons of gold dust. When the university re-gilds its famous Golden Dome—it was done most recently in March 2005—the leftover gold dust is given to managers, who keep it hidden in the stadium. The gloss "is what gives it the real shine," senior manager Matthew McQueary says. "The goal, when you're done, is when you look in the helmet, you can see your reflection."



6 Stohl takes the finished helmets to a room under the stadium bleachers to dry overnight. By then, it's about 6 or 7 p.m. "You're pretty much dead tired," Stohl says. Junior managers spend other days of the week working at practices and games. Then it's another Monday, and a bunch of beat-up helmets are at Gate E—waiting to be made perfect.

SN

■ Lead crystal footballs

To: Southern Miss and Ohio players

From: GMAC Bowl

■ Sony PlayStation Portables

To: Texas and

Iowa players

From: Alamo Bowl



INSIDE AN AIRBORNE ICON

Hitching a ride on the Goodyear blimp delivers a memorable football high *By Dennis Dillon*



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

There are some things you need to know before we hitch a ride to the game in a blimp.

1. There are no flight attendants, so bring your own food.
2. We'll be airborne 6 to 7 hours.
- 2b. There's no bathroom. If you need to lighten your bladder, you'll have to use a relief tube. (Sorry, ladies.)

Thus forewarned, climb aboard Goodyear's *Spirit of America* at Long Beach Airport shortly before noon on New Year's Day. We're bound for Pasadena and the Rose Bowl between Southern California and Michigan. The blimp, based a few miles north of Long Beach in Carson, Calif., has stopped to refuel and change pilots after covering the Rose Parade.

The *Spirit of America*, at 192 feet, is almost two-thirds of a football field long, 50 feet wide and 59½ feet high. Its "bag" or "envelope" holds more than 202,000 cubic feet of helium. I'll sit in a 22-foot-long aluminum gondola. I'm lucky. Not only do I have a window seat, but I'm next to the pilot, Jon Conrad. The other member of our trio is Fabian Ochoa, Goodyear's chief radio and TV

technician, who will operate the camera.

On the way to Pasadena, Conrad keeps us at 1,500 feet—low enough to avoid traffic coming in and out of LAX but high enough so the noise from the twin 210-horse power fuel-injected piston engines doesn't crack the foundations of the houses below. What's nice about taking a blimp to a football game is we

don't have to stop for red lights, worry about drivers cutting us off or wait in a long line to get into a parking lot.

Moving at a leisurely 26 mph, we'll complete the 19-mile trip in about 45 minutes. The view is spectacular. The stadium sits on a large tract in the San Gabriel Valley, just west of downtown Pasadena. The San Gabriel

Mountains rise majestically to the north.

Shortly after 1, about an hour before kickoff, we're "locked in," a director's cue that means ABC's control booth at the stadium has picked up a live feed from the blimp's camera. Another cue is, "You're hot." When Ochoa hears that,

he knows the image from his camera is about to be shown on TV. We're hot to open the telecast—a shot of the stadium's south entrance with the famous Rose Bowl sign and flower.

During the game, we hover at 2,500 feet above sea level, 1,500 feet above the Rose Bowl. Normally, we would make clockwise circles around the stadium, but

One way to start your new year on a high note is to take a trip in a blimp. But you might want to, uh, use the facilities before you take off.



DENNIS DILLON / SN (3)



we've got technical problems with the blimp's camera feed on the west side, so Conrad is advised to stay on the south and east sides.

Navigating a blimp requires two main controls. A wooden "elevator" wheel on the right side of Conrad's chair regulates altitude, and two aluminum rudder foot pedals control direction.

At one point, a 50-mph wind kicks up from the northwest, blowing us backward and challenging Conrad to maintain both altitude and direction. I've been standing and taking pictures inside the gondola, but Conrad advises me to sit down. "It's too unpredictable," he says, moving his limbs frantically. "It went from cruise control to 'I'm earning my pay now.'"

Conrad, 37, has been piloting blimps for nine years—the past six for Goodyear, for which he estimates he has flown 2,000 hours. "My mom didn't like me flying helicopters, but she loves that I fly blimps because they're supersafe," Conrad says.

Conrad's scariest moment actually happened on the ground. Several years ago, he was in a blimp at Hanscom Air Force Base near Boston, ready to lift off when a 767 jet landed nearby. It created a vortex that caused the blimp to start blowing toward the mast, a 30-foot-high aluminum pole to which the blimp is moored. Using the rudder pedals in concert with the wind, Conrad maneuvered the blimp to swing in an arc around the mast and avoided a crash.

The one frustrating part of our trip: It's hard to follow the game. The TV monitor on the dashboard above the instrument panel shows only what Ochoa is shooting; usually, there is a second monitor that carries the game but not

this time. Even when Ochoa's camera shows a play, it is disconcerting because of the delay from the scanner carrying the TV audio feed. I watch a play, but I don't hear Brent Musburger's call through my headset for 10 or 12 more seconds.

Thirty minutes after USC's 32-18 win, Ochoa hears, "That's a wrap." That's the signal for him to raise the camera, which hangs 6 feet below the gondola, and for us to head back to the base.

More than a dozen ground crew members are waiting for us in Carson, where Conrad sets the blimp down gently. Six of them, three on each side, grab the two haul-in lines that hang from the front of the blimp. Others come running with 25-pound bags of steel shot, which they lay over a railing in front of the gondola for ballast. They pull the blimp toward the mast and a crew member who has scaled the pole guides the blimp's nose into a mast cup. They secure the airship with 18 cables.

It is 6:30 p.m. when I climb down the gondola's ladder. As soon as my feet touch terra firma, I start walking—briskly—toward Goodyear's office building. I had forgotten about the relief tube.

INSIDE THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE

The cutting edge

NHL players cut, curve, tape, sharpen and customize equipment in their search for the perfect fit

Predators center Peter Forsberg has spent most of this season searching for the perfect skate. And he isn't just being picky. Forsberg's skate doesn't simply need to fit his foot and be sharp. It also needs to contain a special boot that supports his surgically reconstructed right foot and ankle and allows him to play without pain or fear of another serious injury.

Forsberg's search became an odyssey that took the star from Philadelphia—he started the season with the Flyers—to Sweden to Montreal. Most players don't log that many miles in their equipment quests. But most equipment issues don't have such ramifications. Forsberg's search underscores the need for every player to have "the right stuff"—the perfect equipment that becomes an extension of the athlete himself.

All players have the same basic needs—helmets, skates, sticks, pants, shoulder pads and gloves. Goalies require masks, chest and arm pads, a glove, a blocker, leg pads and skates. Manufacturers help many players get customized equipment from the factory, but once it gets to the players, the customizing continues. Sticks become like snowflakes; no two are alike. Players cut, shave, tape and curve their sticks until they have just the right feel. Saws, torches and planes help turn NHL players into master craftsmen.

Check out how Hurricanes defenseman Mike Commodore makes his sticks just right and what Carolina equipment manager Wally Tatomir does to help the Hurricanes play their best.

► Commodore tapes the top of his stick to give him a better grip. Players also make a knob out of tape to help them know where the end of the stick is by feel and to keep the stick from flying out of their hands.



BOB LEVERONE / SN (5)

▼ Commodore also makes sure the bottoms of the sticks are smooth and the blade curves match. Players can curve their blades a maximum of three-quarters of an inch. Blades must be at least 2 inches wide at all points. A suspicious opponent can call for a stick measurement during a game and force a penalty if the stick is illegal.



◀ To make the sticks identical in length, Commodore makes a quick cut with a hacksaw where a current stick lines up with a new one. He then lays the longer stick on the table and saws through to make the sticks even (and perfect for his 6-4 frame).



◀ Tatomir sharpens the skate of a Hurricanes player. NHL equipment men must know the precise likes and dislikes of every player.

► Sometimes, Tatomir must improvise. He drills a hole about 1 inch in diameter into the back of Rod Brind'Amour's boot and later sews a cover over it. Brind'Amour had a problem with his heel. Was it a blister, a bruise or something else? That was top secret. Whatever the problem, Tatomir found a way to give Brind'Amour's ailing foot a little extra room. —K.Y.

BOB LEVERONE / SN (5)

The one frustrating part of our trip: It's hard to follow the game.

INSIDE A LONG COURTSHIP

The last recruit

While colleges are fawning over Patrick Patterson, he is playing the waiting game—and enjoying every minute of it

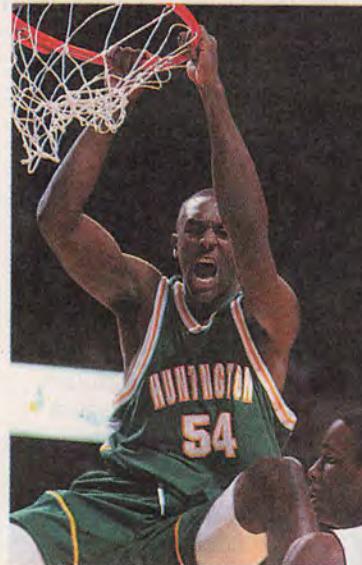
By Mike DeCourcy

Patrick Patterson walked down the steps of Rupp Arena toward the seat being held for him at Kentucky's season-opening Big Blue Madness event. He was recognized immediately and with such great enthusiasm that you'd have thought he was walking arm in arm with UK first lady Ashley Judd.

Fans in the audience, more than 20,000, rhythmically chanted Patterson's name in unison. Any other young basketball player might have ended the recruiting process at that moment. Patterson and his family had a plan, though. They had patience.

So Patterson sits today in his living room in Huntington, W.Va., as the only member of Rivals.com's top 20 who has not chosen a college. He is a 6-8, 235-pound power forward for Huntington High. The walls and shelves here are lined with souvenirs of his basketball excellence—from high schools, camps and summer tournaments—but missing is a framed letter of intent with his signature. Instead, he has a list. Alphabetically, it reads: Duke, Florida, Kentucky, Virginia, Wake Forest, West Virginia.

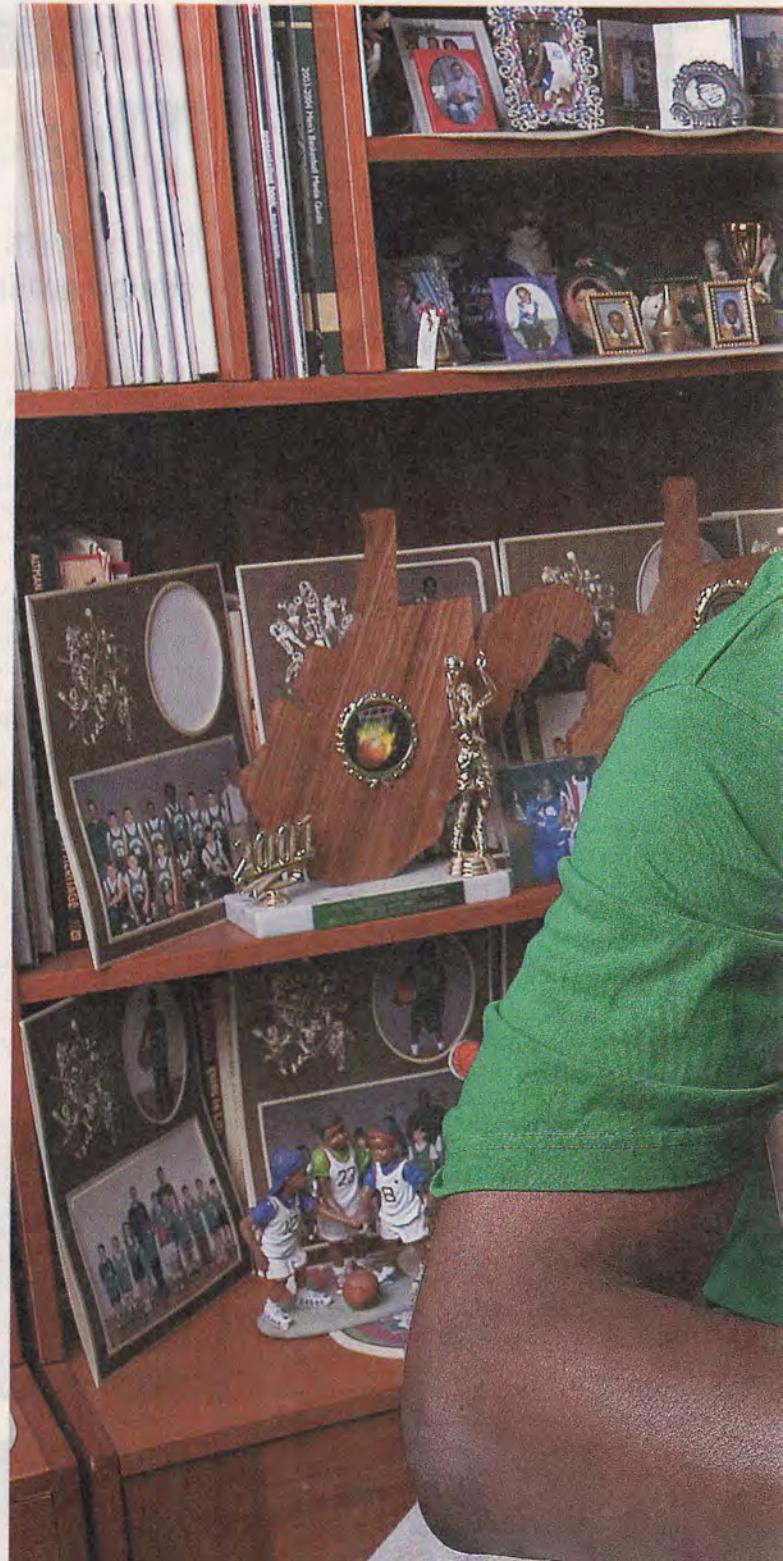
"I enjoy it every day," Patterson says. "It's a blessing to do this. A lot of people signed early, but I wanted to take my time with the process and just enjoy it—go to as many



Like a pretty girl with a bunch of invitations to the prom, Patterson is going to break a lot of hearts when he finally signs a letter of intent.

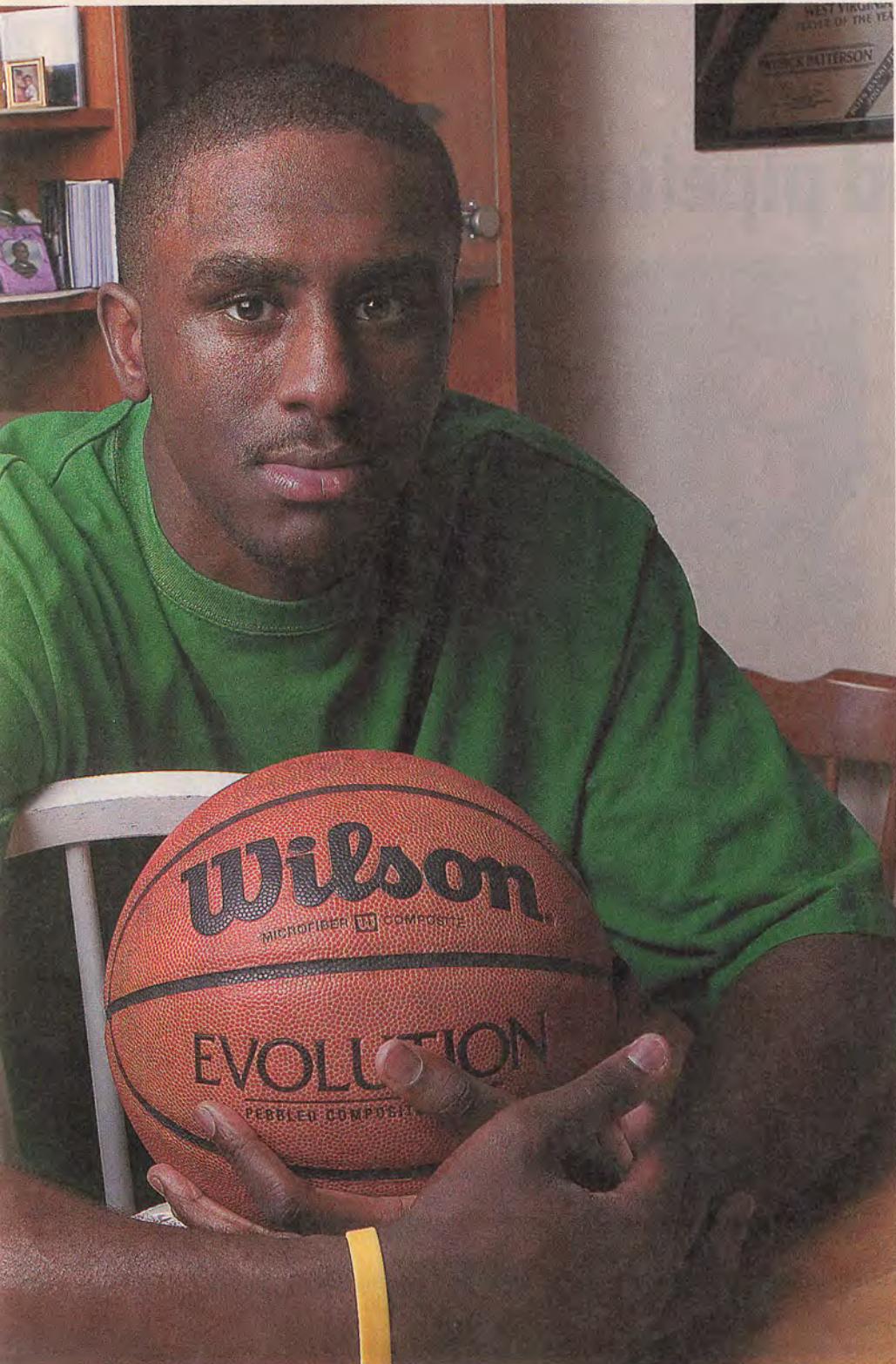
games as I can, talk to the coaches and be 100 percent on my decision."

Patterson planned to cut his list to three programs near the conclusion of Huntington's season in mid-March, then make a final selection within a week of the April 11 national signing date. As the recruitment process continues, Patterson and his family are scouting the schools to see how they're playing, how the coaches run their teams and how the players are behaving. They



have seen every team on his list but Wake Forest in person. College coaches attend Huntington's games when schedules and NCAA regulations permit, though recruiting rules minimize the amount of contact allowed to take place between them and the players.

After Kentucky's Tubby Smith watched a recent game, he greeted the Pattersons and



offered to shake hands with Tywanna Patterson, Patrick's mother. She gave Smith a hug. An NCAA representative happened to be there, so Smith made sure to point out who initiated the contact—almost like arguing a block/charge call during a game.

The family insists continuing the process is about gaining information, not attention.

"Everybody does what they have to do for their child," says Buster Patterson, Patrick's father. "If you feel you can make that decision, get it out of the way, great. I just thought this was best for us, for my boy. It's a story for y'all, but it's no story here. This is a process that I wanted to go through and let him look at the full picture."

SN

Textbook touch

Patrick Patterson rings up points and rebounds for Huntington High, but he's just as adept at piling up texting charges. With one hand and a regular cell phone, he can pound out a message like Itzhak Perlman playing "The Flight of the Bumble Bee."

Patterson's billing plan allots 3,000 texts each month. In January, largely because of communication with coaches at the six colleges he is considering, he went 5,000 over. That's 8,000 texts—sent or received—which is an average of 258 per day.

So it may not be surprising Patterson appreciates that texting has become a prominent part of the recruiting process. According to NCAA rules, recruiters are limited in the number of phone calls they can make to prospects, but there is no restriction on text messages.

"It's good for me," Patterson says, "but bad for my mom since she has to pay the bill."

Of course, Patterson might not have been the only prospect recruited in that pile of those text messages. "I'm sure it was girls, too," says Tywanna Patterson.

"No, it was all coaches," Patrick says with a smirk. "Let's clear that up right now."

Coaches have sent text messages to his parents, as well as Patrick. Here is just a sample of what the Pattersons have received. —M.D.

Just arrived in Miami. Got em tomorrow nite. CU vs St Pat's. Coach Seymour UVA

—From Virginia assistant Steve Seymour to Patrick

Pray as if everything depends on God. And play as if everything depends on you. Coach Battle will be there. I'm confident you, your teammates will do it again.

—From Wake Forest head coach **Skip Prosser** to Patrick, before last year's state title game



Like the Phoenix Suns forwards, Patrick was born to run in our style of play.

—From Prosser to Tywanna

I wanted to thank you for all of your hospitality and a great evening. Thanks for opening up your home. We all had fun.

—From Florida head coach **Billy Donovan** to Tywanna after a home visit last fall

ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES



The Lakeland pipeline

There were no deals. No two-for-ones. No "I'm only going if he's going."

Strange as it sounds, Florida signed *seven* football players from Lakeland (Fla.) High in February. And every one of them could play this fall for coach Urban Meyer.

"That high school team," one BCS coach says, "might have beaten the Western Carolina team (Florida) played last year."

If Florida truly has replaced USC as the king of high school football recruiting, the title was passed when the Lakeland Seven signed. Only two of the players play the same position—twin

Florida tapped into a high school team that probably is good enough to beat a college or two.

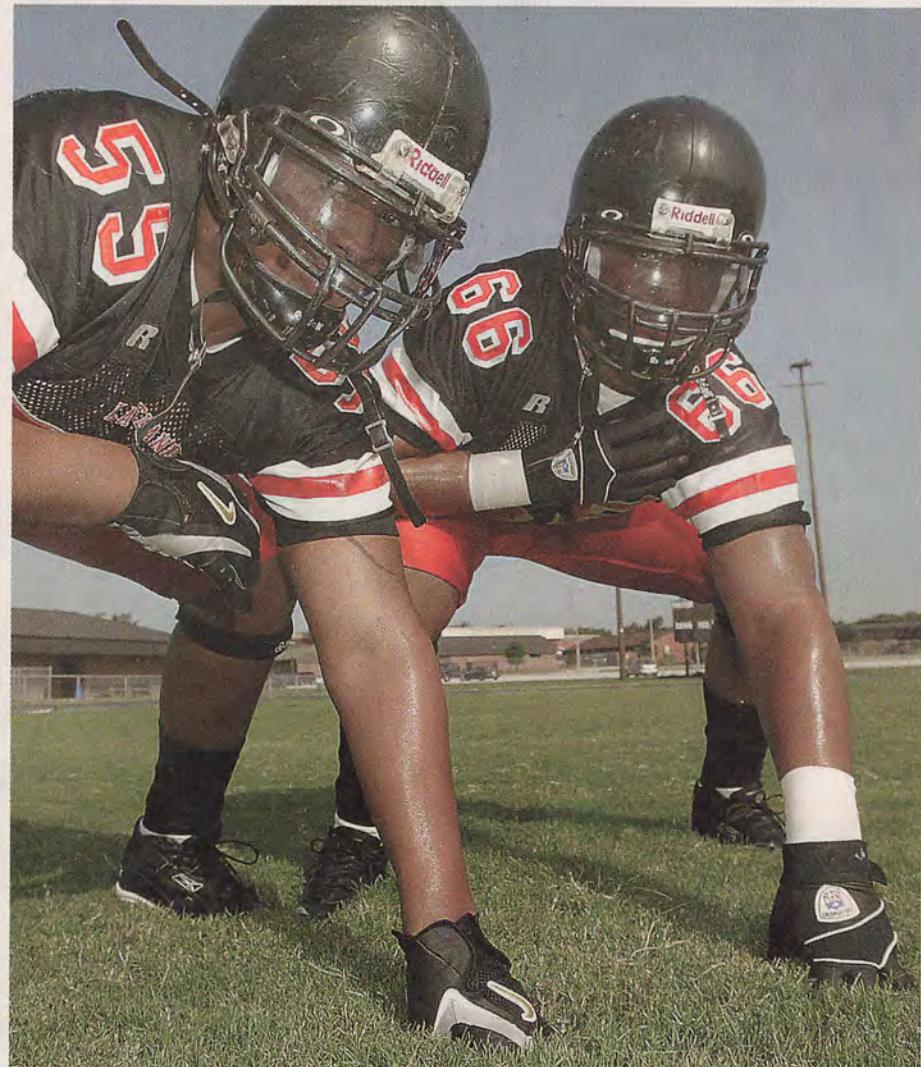
guards Maurkice and Michael Pouncey—but all fill specific needs for the defending national champion Gators.

"The twins," as they're known at Florida—coaches and players still can't tell them apart with a simple glance—weren't the first Lakeland players to commit (there were two others before them). But once the Pounceys did, everything fell into place.

"We all made our own decisions," Michael Pouncey says. "But it kind of steamrolled a little bit, and we're all here."

The twins enrolled early and are participating in spring drills in Gainesville. They've gained nearly 20 pounds of muscle (both are 6-5, 310) since January, and each is already second on the depth chart at a guard position.

Here's the best part: Many recruiting experts felt the twins ranked sixth and seventh among the Lakeland Seven. Maybe that team really could've beaten Western Carolina. —Matt Hayes



DAVID MILLS / THE LEDGER

The twin commitments of brothers Maurkice and Michael Pouncey last June helped turn the road from Lakeland to Gainesville into a heavily traveled recruiting trail.

Seven up

A timeline of commitments from the Lakeland Seven, the cornerstone of Florida's No. 1 recruiting class.

RB Chris Rainey (May 15, 2006). The Gators will use his sub-4.4 40 speed at tailback and slot receiver—much as they used freshman phenom Percy Harvin in 2006.

CB Ahmad Black (June 6, 2006). One of the top-ranked cover corners, he could win a starting job in a depleted secondary. Black's early commitment was surprising, and it led to the turning point in the process one day later.

OL Maurkice and Michael Pouncey (June 7, 2006). The twins had committed to Florida State during their junior seasons. When they switched to Florida—"Coach Meyer was relentless," Maurkice says—it strengthened the commitments of Rainey and Black and helped persuade

the remainder of the group to sign.

WR Paul Wilson (June 19, 2006). His early commitment kept big suitors (Ohio State, Michigan, USC) from moving in after his impressive senior season.

DB/LB Steve Wilks (June 21, 2006). The project player of the seven, he has the speed to play safety but could grow into a linebacker.

DT John Brown (February 1, 2007). He's the top recruit of the seven. Florida identified Brown in his junior season when he outplayed offensive tackle Sam Young—one of the nation's top recruits in 2006 and now a starter at Notre Dame—in the state playoffs.



INSIDE CLINT BOWYER'S MOTORCOACH

Palaces on wheels

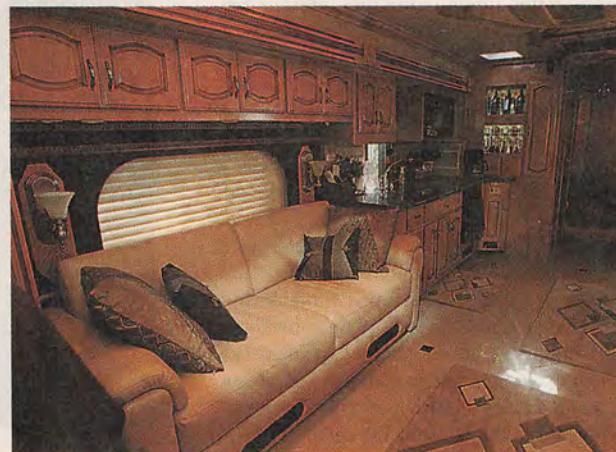
Every race weekend, the world's most exclusive campground assembles at a Nextel Cup track. But don't bother trying to get in. All entrances have guards, and they won't believe you are Jeff Gordon's cousin.

The motorcoaches are extravagant—dig Clint Bowyer's traveling crib—with huge TVs, Internet access and deluxe accommodations. Drivers and their families own them and live in them several days a week for more than 30 weeks a year.

The motorcoach lot is just like every other campground in the country ... except every motorhome costs from \$500,000 to \$1 million and drivers zoom between units on souped-up golf carts. Though it would not be unusual for Mrs. Driver X to knock on Mrs. Driver Y's door to borrow sugar, either one could afford to buy her own grocery store. —Matt Crossman



NASCAR drivers travel in style, as the view from inside Bowyer's ride shows. It's equipped with all the amenities, including a full-time driver, Curtis Nelson.



Ticker shock



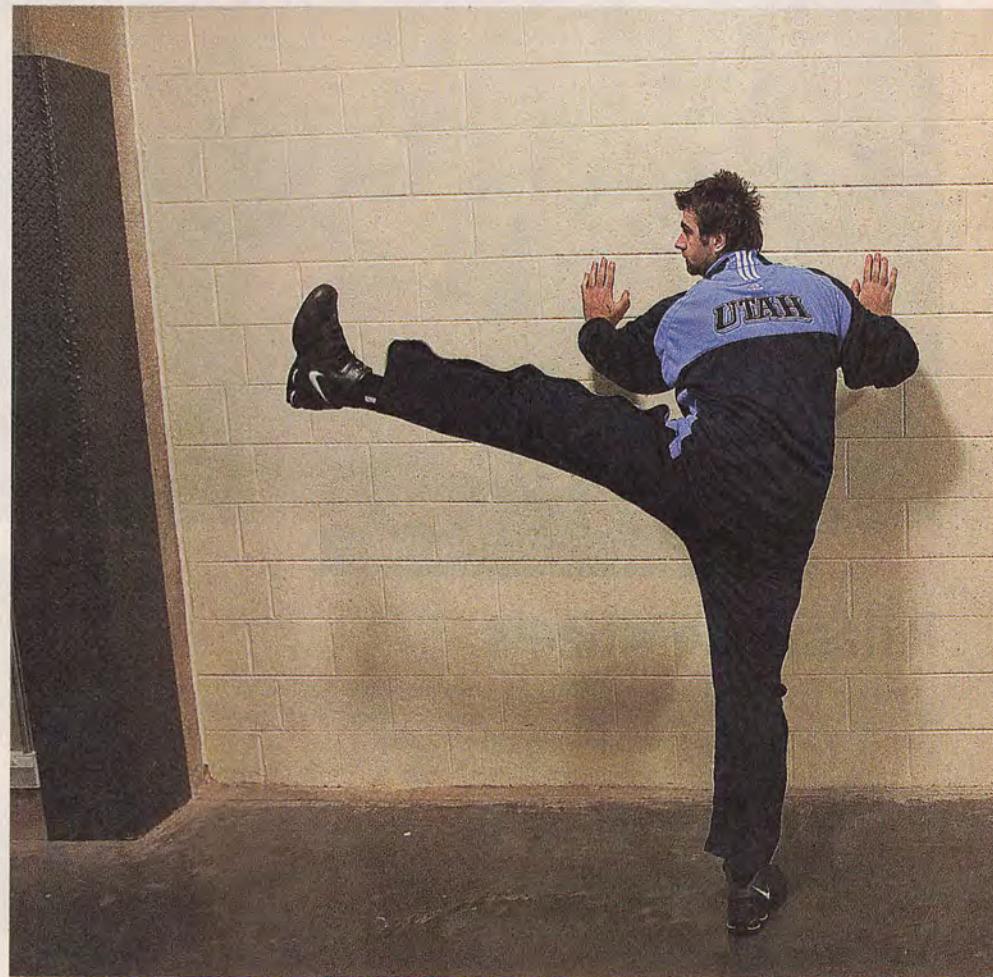
Join us for a day with the Jazz—a day that reveals just how much NBA players hate to have their routines disrupted

By Phil Miller
Photos by Bob Leverone

9:26 a.m. It's 9:26 a.m. on a Friday, and Andrei Kirilenko is scowling.

NBA players crave routine as they persevere through an 82-game season, but the Jazz's clockwork pattern has been disrupted on this East Coast trip. The team's charter flight from Atlanta was delayed by mechanical problems yesterday—the players idled in a hotel lobby all afternoon—and didn't arrive in Charlotte until after 10 p.m.

But that's not why Kirilenko is annoyed. He planned to arrive in the trainer's suite to have his ankles taped for a shootaround before any of his teammates, only to find rookie Dee Brown being taped. Kirilenko has ordered an omelet to be waiting in his room in 10 minutes and had planned to sneak in a 30-minute nap before catching the bus. Now, it's going to be a 25-minute nap. "Rookies," Kirilenko smiles, shaking his head.



10:35

The team's 10:45 bus to the shootaround leaves right on schedule—10 minutes early, just as coach Jerry Sloan likes it. "If you're 5 minutes early, you're 10 minutes late," says center Jarron Collins. Kirilenko falls asleep during the 5-minute ride.

11:12

After watching a brief scouting video in the locker room, the reserves run Charlotte's offensive plays so Utah's starters can defend them.

12:22 p.m.

A steady rain discourages any plans to eat lunch away from the hotel. Collins tries to order room service, but he can't get through because his teammates are doing the same thing.

12:34

Collins gives up and walks to the lobby restaurant to order a salad and chicken breast to be sent to his room. After he eats, he naps for 2 hours.

2:48

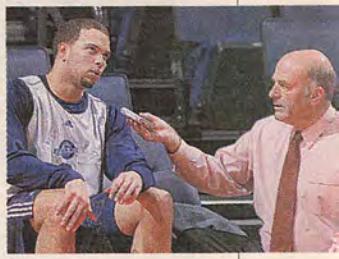
Brown scores a late touchdown on the PlayStation console C.J. Miles has brought along and beats the teenage guard at Madden 07. Miles, stunned, concedes Brown is better than he is. They play four more games to make sure.

4:55

The Jazz's bus arrives at Charlotte Arena for the 7 p.m. game. The rookies have been at the arena for 45 minutes and are going through shooting drills with assistant coach Tyrone Corbin.



It's hour upon hour of stretching for Jazz players—their muscles, their brainpower, their patience and their people skills.



5:40

Kirilenko sits in his uniform at his locker, engrossed in a Russian paperback with a gangster on the cover.

5:58

Illinois alums Brown, Deron Williams and Roger Powell wade into a crowd of about 100 orange-clad Illini fans who want photos and autographs.

6:12

Carlos Boozer, wearing headphones, lies on the floor with a trainer pushing one leg toward his head. "Couldn't play without it," Boozer says of his 15-minute stretching regimen.

6:38

Sloan sends his team out to the floor with a reminder: "Don't take these guys lightly."

9:27

The Jazz loses, 101-89—its second defeat in three games. The players shower, answer reporters' questions and board a bus for the airport. They have a game in Memphis in 22 hours.

11:30

Players quietly eat steak sandwiches and chicken Caesar salads while waiting for their jet to take off. There's an announcement: more mechanical problems.

12:30 a.m.

The jet finally takes off—the team's routine now completely disrupted. Just like its mood. **SN**

INSIDE | PACKING FOR CAMP

Anybody seen the pitching machine?

Even before major league equipment managers gathered last November in Las Vegas for their annual powwow, they had started collecting items to be shipped to spring training. By early February, the Dodgers' Mitch Poole and his staff had loaded up a 16-wheeler for the four-day journey from L.A. to Vero Beach, Fla. —Stan McNeal

7,800 baseballs
500 bats ("Ordering bats is an ongoing process throughout the season," Poole says.)
320 towels
240 pairs of blue socks
180 pairs of spikes
180 game hats

180 batting practice hats
175 gray T-shirts
175 white T-shirts
120 long-sleeved Dri-FIT shirts
120 pairs of gym shorts
100 fleece pullovers
96 St. Patrick's Day hats
("Everybody wants one," Poole says)

96 batting helmets
96 pairs of batting gloves
90 leather belts
90 travel bags
80 short-sleeved Dri-FIT shirts
75 game jackets
60 home uniforms
60 road uniforms
60 batting practice uniforms
60 pairs of running shoes
50 sleeves
32 rolls of packing tape

24 pairs of two-in-one socks (white with the blue stirrup stripe already on)
24 sets of golf clubs
20 elastic belts
18 trunks
15 books of stamps
14 boxes of permanent markers (for labeling apparel, helmets, etc.)
10 pairs of stirrup socks ("They used to be in, went out, came back in, and now they're out again," Poole says.)
4 bat bags (each holds about 40 bats)
4 computers (2 are Macs)
4 sets of fishing gear
2 bicycles
1 printer

1 ream of letterhead stationery
1 pitching machine that throws curves. ("It's hitting coach Eddie Murray's big deal," Poole says. "Guys who throw batting practice aren't going to throw curves.")

Illustration by
Jack Kruyne / SN



INSIDE | MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL

Field trip

You've watched those *Monday Night Football* sideline reporters on TV and thought, *I could do that*. All it takes is a little makeup, a big smile and the ability to ask tough questions like, "You got sacked eight times tonight. How did it feel?"

Well, come join me on their turf.

Suzy Kolber stands on the sideline at the Edward Jones Dome minutes before kickoff of the Rams-Bears game and switches into game mode. Laser-sharp-focus, eyes-straight-ahead game mode. "Get ready to run." Those are the last words she'll say to me.

Kolber moves in front of the camera and gestures for her microphone, using a motion not unlike the one I would use when shaking a bottle of Yoo-hoo. A member of ESPN's

Hanging out with NFL sideline reporters means looking out for the cart, staying off camera and running—lots of running *By Tricia Garner*

production staff hands it to her without a word. She fluffs the bottom of her hair and stares into the camera. The Rams run on the field to a wave of raucous cheers, but Kolber doesn't so much as glance in their direction. She chugs some Dasani, takes a deep breath and begins her first sideline report of the game about ...

OK, you got me. I'm standing 3 feet away, and I can't hear a word she's saying over the crowd. The single most impressive skill of a sideline reporter: the ability to speak in a normal tone while engulfed by thousands of screaming fans.

Kolber has two constant companions during the game—a sideline stage manager named Greg, who comes armed with rosters for both teams, and a guy whose sole

responsibility is holding up a metal pole with a flat TV screen mounted to the top so Kolber can see it at all times. The monitor displays the same broadcast you see at home, and Kolber refers to it often.

Her routine is meticulous. She watches every play on the field, turns to the screen to study the replay and makes a few notations on her legal pad. After every play. She has pages and pages of notes, written small and tight and striped with yellow and pink highlighter.

I wasn't looking for a running partner, but I've found one all the same. Kolber wasn't kidding when she told me to get ready to run. A lot.

About halfway through the first quarter, Bears quarterback Rex Grossman lofts a pass to Thomas Jones, and off we go—through a

Showing a Sirius side

Step inside the 'studio' and find out why *Tony Stewart Live* is a lot like, well, *Tony Stewart live* *By Matt Crossman*

Welcome to *Tony Stewart Live* on Sirius Satellite Radio. Tonight's show comes to you from the suburban Charlotte home of co-host Matt Yocum. C'mon into a jerry-built studio in the study, where it appears every inch of surface space—desk, table, bookshelves—is covered with pictures of Yocum and racecar drivers, including a hilarious one with Cale Yarborough. Stewart is dressed in his version of a three-piece suit—T-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

After long making himself the butt of his own fat jokes, Stewart has lost at least 20 pounds and his arms have definition they've never had. I've made enough jokes about his weight that I feel obligated to point out the improvement to him. Later on the show, he'll say it's weird when men notice his new physique.

Talk radio suits Stewart because he simply says whatever he wants—just as he does in the rest of his life. Stewart never gets enough credit for how funny he is, probably because

the targets are often the people taking notes. His material is mostly PG-13, and if there is a genre for it, it is high school trash-talk. Tonight, his best lines include:

- Comparing the Car of Tomorrow to a wood-paneled station wagon.
- Repeatedly calling NASCAR vice president Jim Hunter "Uncle Gino." Stewart and Yocum, his co-host, wonder aloud whether Hunter, a frequent guest, will send an invoice. This leads to Stewart discussing his frequent visits with NASCAR officials when he gets in trouble. "They never sent me an invoice ... well, yes, they have—\$50,000 at a time," he says.

- Referring to his girlfriend's family in Georgia as the Clampetts. "I look forward to hunting down there, if I don't get shot in the driveway first." Also, Stewart talks about a taxidermist sponsor. There's no way in the world a taxidermist could typically afford to sponsor Stewart. To clue me in, he pulls his headphones off and whispers, "It's her brother." The guy stuffed and mounted four or five deer

mess of cables, chairs and players. "Watch the cart! Watch the cart!" someone yells. I look up. The "cart" is more like a small car. It transports the crane that holds the main TV camera. When there's a big play, it moves—fast. Get out of the way or get flattened like Grossman by a bone-crushing blitz.

In the second quarter, a Rams P.R. assistant slides through the throng of players and whispers to Kolber: Rams linebacker Pisa Tinoisamo is getting X-rays on his right hand. She's on the air immediately with the injury report. A little later, the assistant comes back with an update: Tinoisamo's hand is broken.



Their styles may be different, but Kolber (above) and Tafoya know their turf and how to ring up points.



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN (2)

Kolber relays the news to the audience. I had visions of sideline reporters making sneaky fact-finding missions to the locker room, but the reality is surprisingly simple.

I switch sidelines in the second half to Michele Tafoya's post on the Bears' side of the field. My back hurts from standing for so long,



Stewart never hits the brakes—it's all Tony all the time.

one year before. Stewart thanked him by name after winning a race at Atlanta last fall, and the guy got four calls that night.

■ Lamenting the boring Nextel Cup championship banquet. "For the last three years, Jerry Lewis has called halfway through the banquet and said he wants his telethon back."

Between breaks, Stewart tries to get my headphones to work. I can hear Stewart and Yocum but not callers or guests. He plugs my headphones into every open portal, but nothing works. Oh, well, the interplay between Stewart and Yocum is what makes the show work, and I don't need headphones for that.

On air and on breaks, Yocum is a frequent target of Stewart's gibes. Stewart cracks that he got stuck with Yocum because the good hosts already had jobs. Stewart gives him a mild tongue-lashing during one break because Yocum was outbid on eBay—in the middle of the show—for a helmet once worn by the late Benny Parsons.

Stewart and Yocum have been good friends since 1995. A picture of them scuba diving sits in Yocum's study/studio, next to racing helmets, memorabilia, media awards and the shoes Stewart wore when he won the 2002 Cup title. When they aren't insulting each other, Stewart calls Yocum "Matty-cakes" and they call each other "sweetheart."

And Stewart thinks it's weird I noticed he lost weight.

SN

and it's possible Tafoya's does, too; she bends down and retrieves three Advil from her bag during a break in the action.

Tafoya is quite friendly and more laid-back than Kolber, which I attribute partly to style and partly to the fact it's late in what is quickly becoming a blowout. She jokes around, she reacts more to big plays—"Oh, my gosh!" she exclaims after Devin Hester scores on a kickoff return for the second time in the game. "This is NFL history!"—and prefers to stay put at about the 20-yard line instead of hustling up and down the sideline.

But she still means business. I stand by while she grabs Grossman for a postgame interview, and she glances over. "Can you scoot over a little?" I move back and over a few feet. She stops and gives me a look, a piercing, "Seriously, don't mess with me right now" kind of look. "Can you move out of the camera shot?" she asks.

I practically bolt out of the way. I'm not about to mess with a sideline reporter on her turf. SN

INSIDER STAN McNEAL

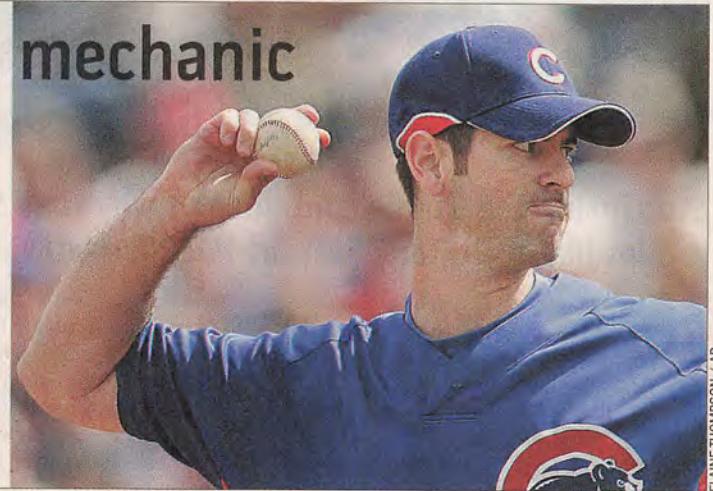


Prior's mechanics need a mechanic

There's no shortage of theories for the sad decline of **Mark Prior**, which includes a nearly 10-mph drop in his fastball velocity to the mid-80s:

- The Cubs abused him by pitching him 234½ innings as a 23-year-old in 2003.
- He is—and always has been—a little spoiled with a hint of softness.
- He was the unfortunate victim of too many fluky injuries.

But there's also this: His so-called perfect mechanics have been flawed all along. A big league pitching coach told me three years ago that Prior was headed for significant injury problems. The coach refused to give details and wouldn't go on the record. When I recently reminded him of his analysis, the coach still would not elaborate or go on the record. But I'm convinced Prior will not get back to top-flight big league pitcher without overhauling his mechanics.



ELAINE THOMPSON / AP

Bats behind schedule



ERIC RISBERG / QP

Even with super X-ray glasses, Bonds can't find his usual bats.

Producing 2,000 orders for big league bats. Because there wasn't a full freeze until mid-January, Holman's main lumberyard was subject to persistent flooding. The delay sent Bonds looking for another bat company to supply the wood that could hit No. 756.

speedreads

I'm not buying Pete Rose's latest headline grab that he bet on the Reds every game he managed. His story changes as often as Barry Bonds' retirement plans.

So A-Rod still is trying to convince us he wants to stay in New York. Or is he trying to convince himself?

Prediction on Julian Tavarez's run as Red Sox closer: two weeks—or until he blows his top, whichever comes first.

If you read one baseball book this year, make it *The Soul of Baseball*, the account of Buck O'Neil's final year. Guaranteed to make you laugh and cry—and even madder than you already were that O'Neil isn't in the Hall of Fame.

A late-arriving winter in Ottawa means late-arriving maple bats for dozens of major leaguers. Sam Holman, the man who first put maple in the hands of Barry Bonds, told the *Contra Costa Times* that he is "way, way behind" in pro-

RHP **Eric Gagne** and the Rangers have been talking optimistically about his comeback, much as the Dodgers were this time last year. Though Gagne has been pleased with his command, changeup and curve, the velocity of his fastball barely is reaching the 90s. With less than two weeks before the season opens, it's not realistic to expect Gagne to be as dominant closing games as he was before undergoing three surgeries (two elbow, one back) in the past two years. > The Twins want LHP **Glen Perkins**, 24, to gain experience as a starter in Class AAA, but the native Minnesotan and his wicked curve have been so impressive in relief that he could be called up if the bullpen runs short on lefty help. > White Sox LF **Scott Podsednik** returned ahead of schedule from a sports hernia surgery in January. He played in a game about a week earlier than expected, and he flashed his speed with a nice running catch along the left field line. > The Padres traded for 3B **Kevin Kouzmanoff** because of his power potential, but he has impressed the team with his defense. Padres coaches have been talking up Kouzmanoff's hands since early in camp. > **Mark Teahen**'s move from third base to right field has gone so well the Royals tried

INSIDE DISH

him in center for a spring exhibition. They need a backup for **David DeJesus**. > After adjusting his hands to keep them in the hitting zone longer,

Mets RF **Shawn Green** hit his first homer of the spring. By week's end, however, Green was still struggling to get his spring average to .200. > A's RHP **Rich Harden** is healthy and, not coincidentally, so are his spring numbers: 18 K's, 1 walk



Gagne

PAUL CONNORS / AP

in his first 8½ innings. If Harden stays healthy, LHP **Johan Santana** will have competition for the A.L. Cy Young Award. > The Dodgers aren't considering RHP **Chad Billingsley** for the fifth starter job because they say he will benefit from a season in the bullpen. The Dodgers want Billingsley to become more efficient. It's also easier to showcase RHP **Brett Tomko** and LHP **Mark Hendrickson** as trade bait when they're in the rotation.

A.L.

FOCUS ON CAMP BATTLES

N.L.

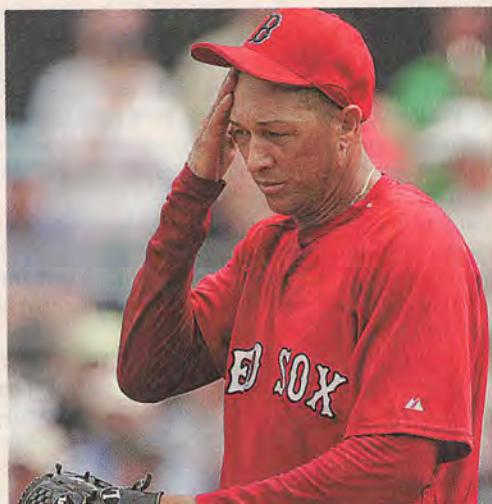
Team	Position	Main combatants
Angels	Catcher	Jeff Mathis, Jose Molina, Mike Napoli
Napoli's power and plate discipline give him an edge on offense, but Molina has more experience.		
Astros	Right fielder	Richard Hidalgo, Jason Lane, Luke Scott
Scott remains the leader, but Lane is making a strong case because of his solid plate production.		
Athletics	Outfielder roles	Hiram Bocachica, Travis Buck, Ryan Goleski, Charles Thomas
Injuries might have opened up two jobs. Goleski is likely to stick on the roster; Buck may have to wait.		
Blue Jays	Nos. 4 and 5 starters	Tomo Ohka, John Thomson, Josh Towers, Victor Zambrano
No one has emerged as the clear leader. Ohka and Thomson have been up and down.		
Brewers	No. 5 outfielder	Brady Clark, Gabe Gross, Laynce Nix
Clark likely will get the nod; he can play all three outfield spots and bunts well.		
Cardinals	Nos. 4 and 5 starters	Braden Looper, Anthony Reyes, Brad Thompson
Looper and Reyes have pitched well, but Thompson has done nothing to take himself out of the race.		
Cubs	No. 5 starter	Angel Guzman, Wade Miller, Mark Prior
Prior was sent to the minor league complex to work on the alignment of his delivery.		
Devil Rays	Utility infielder	Brendan Harris, B.J. Upton
Upton is the superior athlete; Harris plays with great consistency.		
D-backs	Final position player	Brian Barden, Scott Hairston, Robby Hammock, Dave Kryszel
Hairston, an outfielder, is the front-runner because he has played well and is out of options.		
Giants	Closer	Armando Benitez, Brian Wilson
Unless Benitez pitches lights-out in the Cactus League, the team probably will trade him.		
Indians	Utility infielder	Hector Luna, Luis Rivas, Mike Rouse
Rouse's capable bat and experience at shortstop may land him the job.		
Mariners	Final bullpen spot	Chris Reitsma, Sean White
Reitsma, 29, has the edge because he has more experience.		
Marlins	Late-inning roles	Kevin Gregg, Matt Lindstrom, Randy Messenger, Henry Owens
Gregg has the experience the team is seeking, but Lindstrom is the hardest thrower in camp.		
Mets	No. 5 starter	Chan Ho Park, Mike Pelfrey
Even if Pelfrey, 23, doesn't win the job to start the season, expect him to crack the rotation by June.		
Nationals	Nos. 2-5 starters	Jason Bergmann, Matt Chico, Shawn Hill, Jason Simontacchi
These guys have pitched their way to the top of a list of candidates that started at 14.		
Orioles	Final two bullpen spots	Brian Burres, Jeremy Guthrie, Hayden Penn, Todd Williams
A second situational lefthander or a long reliever? Expect Guthrie and Williams, two righties, to prevail.		
Padres	Leadoff hitter	Jose Cruz, Paul McAnulty, Terrelle Sledge
Sledge has shown he can drive the ball to all fields and hit lefthanded pitching.		
Phillies	Final two bullpen spots	Joseph Bisenius, Fabio Castro, Justin Germano, Alfredo Simon
Castro has a huge edge for one spot because the team would like a second lefthander.		
Pirates	No. 5 starter	Tony Armas, Shawn Chacon
Both have pitched well, but Armas has shown better command.		
Rangers	No. 5 starter	Bruce Chen, Kameron Loe, Jamey Wright
Wright, a nonroster invitee, has been the most impressive so far because of his solid stuff.		
Reds	No. 5 starter	Matt Belisle, Bobby Livingston, Kirk Saarloos, Paul Wilson
If Wilson continues to pitch well, he'll claim the job and Saarloos will head to the bullpen.		
Royals	Catcher	John Buck, Jason LaRue
LaRue is hitting better than Buck, but it's still possible they could share the job.		
Tigers	Final bullpen spot	Edward Campusano, Chad Durbin, Zach Miner
Campusano may get the nod if the team opts to keep a second lefthanded reliever.		
Twins	DH	Ken Harvey, Jason Kubel
Injuries got in the way of the competition, but Kubel earned the job by hitting well.		
Yankees	Backup catcher	Wil Nieves, Todd Pratt
Nieves is superior on defense, but Pratt, 40, would provide a veteran presence.		

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Wanted: a fifth good man

The Dodgers and White Sox are among the teams trying to nail down the final spot in their rotation. RHP **Brett Tomko** and LHPs **Hong-Chih Kuo** and **Mark Hendrickson** are the front-runners with the Dodgers. Kuo may have had a narrow edge because he's a hard-throwing lefthander, but he has been a little wild this spring.

■ It appears LHP **John Danks**, 21, has moved ahead of RHPs **Gavin Floyd** and **Charlie Haeger** for the inside track on the White Sox's No. 5 job. The team likes Danks' calm demeanor on the mound and his ability to attack the strike zone with all of his pitches. He throws a low-90s fastball that has great movement.



CHARLES KRUPA / AP

ARMS RACE With RHP **Mike Timlin** (oblique) likely knocked out of the race, the Red Sox's closer competition will come down to RHPs **Joel Pineiro**, **Brendan Donnelly** and **Julian Tavarez**. Expect Tavarez to win the job because of his ability to induce double plays.

Fielders choice

Martin Prado has done enough to win the Braves' everyday role at second base. He currently is better on defense than **Kelly Johnson**, who lacks experience at second, and has shown signs of being a capable hitter. But the team appears intent on giving the job to Johnson; it believes Johnson's athleticism will ultimately make him more valuable than Prado.

■ In Colorado, **Troy Tulowitzki** has an edge on **Clint Barmes** for the starting shortstop job. Both players have been solid on defense, but Tulowitzki has been a more impressive hitter.

Fantasy Source

Closing arguments

By Eric Ferguson



In fantasy baseball, nothing says *bling* quite like owning an elite closer or two. But drafting Francisco Rodriguez or Joe Nathan is like putting spinners on your car: It costs too much and yields far too little in return.

According to our Average Draft Position Tracker, which you can find on Fantasy Source's rankings pages, top-tier closers such as K-Rod and Nathan start moving as early as the second round in 12-team leagues. The top five closers usually are gone before the end of the fourth round. My advice: Don't get sucked into the mad dash for ninth-inning specialists.

A closer's role limits his production. A position player plays almost every day. A starter works a lot of innings. A closer? He pitches if he is rested and if his team is winning—but not when it's winning by *too* much because then the manager hands the ball to a bullpen filler instead.

Though starters log about 200 innings in a season, closers pitch 60 to 70, which limits the impact their skinny ERAs and WHIPs have on your team.

Even the best closer isn't worth an early pick. Good closers produce in all categories even though you're really picking them for one: saves. But how much more does a closer who gives you across-the-board production contribute to a fantasy team?

According to Fantasy Source's Player Analyzer projections, which estimate player values in terms of Roto points, Nathan (11.95 Roto points) ranks first among closers but is the 55th most valuable player overall. That's right, the top closer in the game ranks behind Lyle Overbay and Adrian Gonzalez.

You can draft closers who are almost as good later. I strapped on my nerd goggles to do a little research and found that the difference between the top-ranked closer and the 13th-ranked closer was just 4.42 Roto points last season.

It was the smallest such talent gap among all positions other than outfielder last season. You don't have to wait around for the 13th-best closer—or as we like to call him, Chad Cordero—but you wouldn't be sunk if you did.

Nathan may be one of the best closers, but he doesn't have to be one of your first picks.

STEVEN SENNE / AP

SN Games tip

Brian Roberts' 1,475 points last season in SPORTING NEWS' Ultimate Fantasy Baseball don't look like many when you compare them to fellow second baseman Chase Utley's 2,219. But if you can't afford Utley (\$7.85 million) right away in the market-based game, you should consider Roberts (\$5 million) for now. Roberts compiled those points in just 138 games, an average of 10.7 points per game. That's a better rate than more expensive options such as Dan Uggla and Jeff Kent. —George Winkler



CHARLIE RIEDEL / AP



Find out more about Ultimate Fantasy Baseball at fantasygames.sportingnews.com/baseball.

RANKINGS

◆ Relief pitchers

1	A	Francisco Rodriguez
2	Twins	Joe Nathan
3	Mets	Billy Wagner
4	Yankees	Mariano Rivera
5	Blue Jays	B.J. Ryan
6	Mariners	J.J. Putz
7	A's	Houston Street
8	Padres	Trevor Hoffman
9	White Sox	Bobby Jenks
10	Dodgers	Takashi Saito
11	Orioles	Chris Ray
12	Brewers	Francisco Cordero
13	Nationals	Chad Cordero
14	Tigers	Todd Jones
15	Rockies	Brian Fuentes
16	Astros	Brad Lidge
17	Phillies	Tom Gordon
18	Braves	Bob Wickman
19	Rangers	Eric Gagne
20	Cardinals	Jason Isringhausen



FRANK GUNN / AP

You'll need an early-round pick to land him, and you'll need a microscope to see his WHIP. Despite a drop in K/9 ratio last season, Ryan is still a strikeout machine.

On a better team, he would save 40 games. Ray's stats sparkled in 2006, and his young arm never tired. In fact, he was at his best in the final two months (1.29 ERA).

We keep waiting for a Coors Field reality check, but back-to-back 30-save seasons speak volumes. Like the elite closers, Fuentes puts up more than a strikeout per inning.

His numbers after joining Atlanta last July (1.04 ERA, 1.00 WHIP, 12.50 K/BB) were far better than his numbers in Cleveland (4.18, 1.43, 1.55). But Mike Gonzalez and Rafael Soriano are lurking. —Chris Bahr

INSIDER PAUL ATTNER

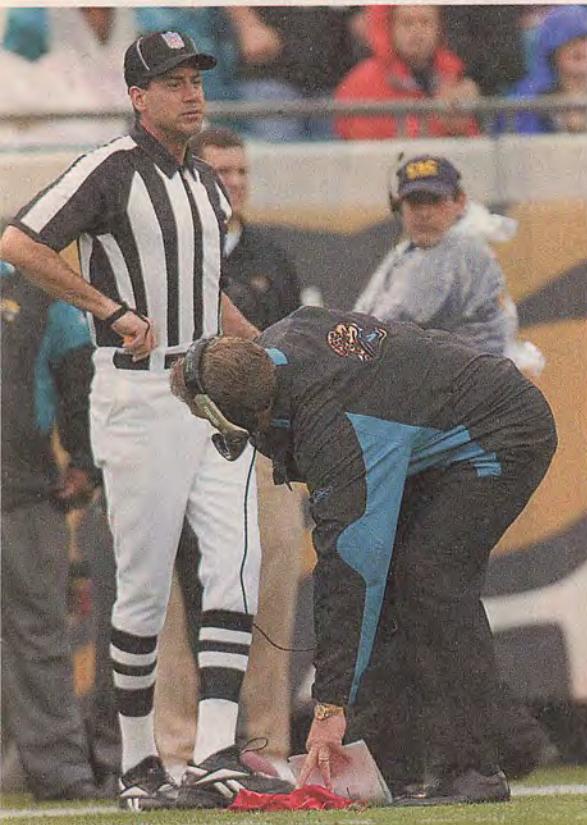
pattner@sportingnews.com



Put away the red flags. I've got a better instant replay idea.

Listen up, owners—here's the plan

After learning how revenue can be enhanced by selling more overpriced nylon jackets to gullible fans in China, team owners will take time next week during their annual winter meeting to consider proposed changes and tweaks to the rules. I'll help them out with some suggestions on how to improve their on-field product.



BOB LEVERONE / SNN

If the NFL took a replay cue from college football, coaches wouldn't need to throw—or pick up—flags.

speedread

Despite ongoing economic problems, businesses in New Orleans responded to the Saints' 2006 success by buying all the luxury suite seats in the Superdome for the 2007 season. Paul Tagliabue's decision to force owner Tom Benson to keep the team in the city has become a major part of his legacy as NFL commissioner.

Instant replay

Anyone still opposed to replay needs to get over it. But that doesn't mean it can't be refined. The NFL needs to embrace how college football handles reviews—no coaches' challenges, no limits on reviews and a replay official upstairs determining what to look at and making the final decision.

I don't believe college games have been significantly lengthened by replay intrusions. But unlike the NFL, colleges have a method to review every iffy call. In the NFL, too many plays that should be reviewed aren't. And that's not good.

Plus, let's broaden what is reviewable. It's ludicrous not to include pass interference. This is the most punitive penalty in the books, yet it's off-limits for a second look. Let's stop this nonsense of exempting plays because they are "judgment" calls. What's wrong with eliminating bad judgments?

Overtime

Sudden death deserves a proper burial. Any system that does not give each team at least one possession in overtime is not a good one. So this is what the league should do: Give each club a possession after a kickoff, and if neither scores, it's a tie. If both score the same number of points on their possession, then it goes to sudden death. Playoff spots are too precious to have overtime contests decided as they are now. A coin flip should never be so pivotal.

Quarterback protection

The league will suffer if too many star quarterbacks are lost to injuries, so it needs to protect its most important position. But I think the strict manner in which referees are interpreting the current rules needs to be modified.

Let's make sure the defense doesn't get penalized because of a great acting job by the quarterback. No matter whether a quarterback is inside or outside the pocket or whether a defender extends his arms and pushes him down, don't call it unless you see a deliberate intent at a cheap shot. We're seeing far too many gentle nudges become major penalties.

Coaching behavior

Head coaches complain much too frequently to officials. There's no need for all this screaming, wild gesturing and headset tossing. A few more unsportsmanlike behavior flags would end this nonsense. SN

INSIDE DISH

Bears coach **Lovie Smith** told a judge last week that if DT **Tank Johnson** were sent to jail, it would have a "devastating" effect on his career. Fortunately, that didn't keep the judge from sentencing Johnson to 120 days in jail. The judge said that just because Johnson was a professional football player, he wasn't above the law. That is a message the NFL should place in its player code of conduct handbook. ➤ If the Raiders use the No. 1 overall pick to draft LSU QB **JaMarcus Russell**, who had a scintillating workout at his pro day last week, it will put control of the rest of the first round in the unsure hands of Lions G.M. **Matt Millen**. The Lions need a quarterback, but there's no indication coordinator **Mike Martz** loves Notre Dame's **Brady Quinn**. Coach **Rod Marinelli** would prefer to take a defensive player with the second overall choice, but none in the draft is considered worthy of that slot. That's why Detroit will consider moving out of that position if it can pick up additional players and/or picks. ➤ The Falcons' decision to change the makeup of their offensive line—new coach **Bobby Petrino** wants it to become bigger and stronger—has been stalled by all the outlandish money being spent on linemen in the free-agent market. Cap-conscious Atlanta now is faced with a slower transition toward Petrino's model. ➤ **Steve Mariucci** would like another shot as a head coach. Paired with a quality general manager, he would be an excellent hire. Look for him to be seriously considered next offseason, when the next jobs open up.

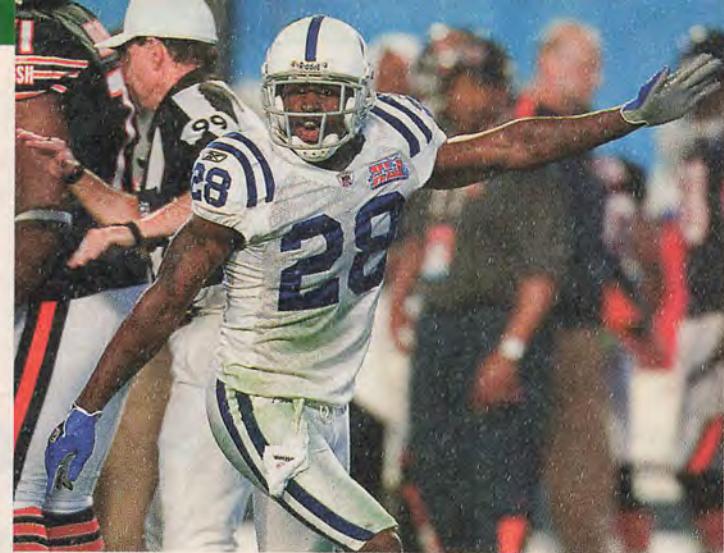
NFL INSIDE THE AFC

New **BROWNS** DL **Robaire Smith** is a solid, durable player but not a difference-maker. He has the size (6-4, 328), mobility and strength to play end or nose tackle. The team might need him to play both positions because DE **Orpheus Rye**, 34, and NT **Ted Washington**, 38, are aging and free-agent DE **Alvin McKinley** is likely to leave. Smith, 29, isn't much of a pass rusher—he has produced only four sacks over the past three seasons—but is suited for the two-gap grunt work required in a 3-4 scheme. ... The **CHIEFS** are trying to build depth at defensive tackle. Free-agent pickup **Alfonso Boone** (6-4, 318), a longtime backup with the Bears who has good size and decent power, likely will be a two-down player who comes out in passing situations. The team also re-signed **Ron Edwards** (6-3, 315), a starter last season who has good size and some power. Neither player provides much pass-rush pressure, so expect the club to draft at least one tackle, probably on Day 1. ... The **BENGALS** decided they couldn't wait for one of their inexperienced centers—**Eric Ghiaciuc** and **Ben Wilkerson**—to blossom in the wake of **Rich Braham**'s retirement. They signed **Alex Stepanovich**, who started 30 games with the Cardinals over three seasons. Stepanovich takes good angles and is aggressive but struggles against bull-rushing tackles. He must improve his lower-body strength. ... With the departure of **Willis McGahee**, the **BILLS** are expected to use a group effort at running back. **Anthony Thomas**, who performed well while McGahee was injured last season, was re-signed to be part of the committee. Thomas (6-2, 225) lacks great speed but runs with good vision and balance. ... Free-agent pickup **Nick Harper** gives the **TITANS** a possible replacement at cornerback for **Pacman Jones**, who could be suspended or released because of legal problems. Harper is a physical playmaker, but he'll have to adjust to the club's defense, which calls for corners to play more man coverage than Harper did with the Colts. ... The **TEXANS** re-signed RB **Ron Dayne** to be the backup for **Ahman Green** and to carry the ball in goal-line situations. The team isn't confident Dayne has the stamina to be an every-down back for an extended stretch, but he proved last season he can carry the load for a handful of games. ... With the signing of **Kelley Washington**, the **PATRIOTS** appear to have completed the rebuilding of their wideout unit. Washington (6-3, 218) has the speed to get deep and the size to be effective in the red zone. But he lacks focus, which has led to too many dropped passes, and has had injury problems. He will compete for the No. 3 job. ... Look for the **JETS** to pick a lineman on the draft's first day. They might trade down from the 25th overall pick to select Auburn G **Ben Grubbs** and get an extra pick. LG **Pete Kendall**, 33, might play only one more year, and the team must groom a road grader to improve the running game. ... With new **DOLPHINS** FB **Cory Schlesinger** clearing holes for RB **Ronnie Brown**, Brown could have a breakout season. Schlesinger is one of the league's most respected blockers, though at 34, he has durability concerns, particularly after missing 10 games over the past three years. ... The departure of free agent **Kyle Brady** (Patriots) leaves the **JAGUARS** without a dominant run-blocking tight end. The club was pleasantly surprised by TE **Marcedes Lewis**' quick development as a blocker during his rookie season; he'll need to improve even more in 2007. ... **STEELERS** LT **Trai Essex** needs

to have a big showing this offseason if he wants to earn a starting job. A third-round pick in 2005, Essex has good quickness and athletic ability but needs to get stronger. ...

RAVENS return man **B.J. Sams** (broken ankle) says he will be ready for training camp. Sams was a major factor in the improvement of the offense last season because he repeatedly gave the team good field position. ... The **CHARGERS** re-signed OLB **Carlos Polk**, one of G.M. **A.J. Smith**'s favorite players because he plays hard and has overcome injuries. Though he lacks

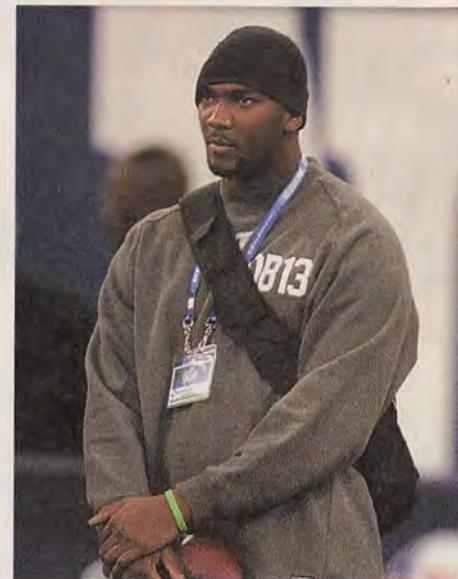
elite speed, Polk is an excellent special teams player who filled in well while **Shawne Merriman** was suspended in 2006. ... The draft is strong at the defensive line positions, particularly at end, which is where the **BRONCOS** need the most help. They could target Nebraska's **Adam Carricker** or Georgia's **Charles Johnson** with the 21st overall pick. They also could try to trade up for a tackle such as Michigan's **Alan Branch** or Louisville's **Amobi Okoye**.



BOB LEVERONE / SN (2)

Colts need action from Jackson

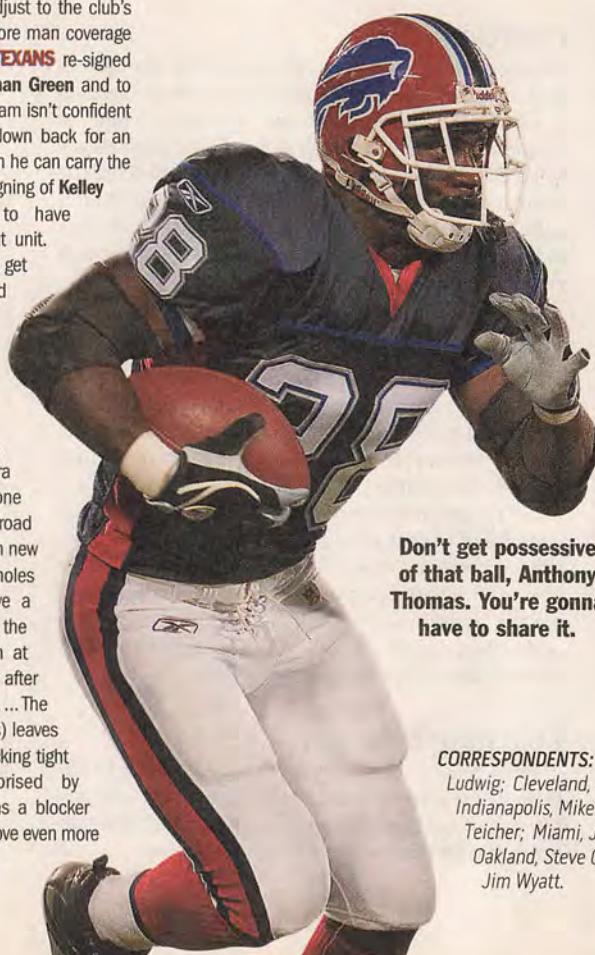
With the departure of **Nick Harper**, arguably the Colts' best cornerback the past four seasons, the team needs **Marlin Jackson** to step up. Jackson, a 2005 first-round pick, has good size (6-0, 196), solid cover skills and a physical style. But he lacks experience at corner after playing safety for a good chunk of his first two NFL seasons.



MICHAEL CONROY / AP

Russell's rep rebounds

After the Combine, Raiders officials questioned LSU QB **JaMarcus Russell**'s work ethic and were concerned about a possible weight problem, but Russell allayed those fears at his pro day. He had lost 9 pounds—to 256—since the Combine and showed off his arm. He also spent considerable time with coach **Lane Kiffin**. The team then attended the pro day of Georgia Tech WR **Calvin Johnson**, a game-breaker coveted by owner **Al Davis**. Still, the club likely will select Russell because it lacks a proven quarterback.

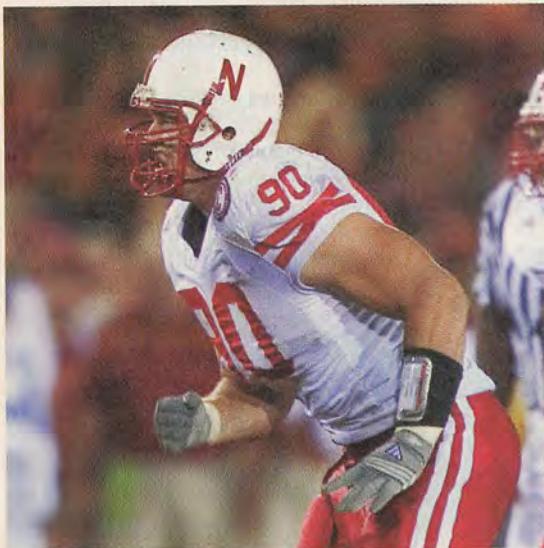


Don't get possessive of that ball, Anthony Thomas. You're gonna have to share it.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

INSIDE THE NFC

Kevin Kaesviharn, signed by the **SAINTS**, probably will serve as a nickel safety but could push **Roman Harper** or **Josh Bullocks** for a starting job. Kaesviharn, 30, excels at getting himself and teammates in the right position and could provide a playmaking element the secondary lacks. He had six interceptions last season. ... Because the **FALCONS** lack quality cornerbacks, free-agent pickup **Lewis Sanders** will get a shot at the right corner job. Known for stellar special teams play, Sanders (6-1, 208) has good size and is solid in run support. But he lacks the speed to recover when beaten. Another signee, **Toniu Fonoti** (6-4, 350), will get a look at left guard. Fonoti has struggled with injury problems and drastic weight fluctuations. ... With **Shaun McDonald** added to the mix, expect the **LIONS** to make heavy use of their three-wideout package because coordinator **Mike Martz** finally has confidence that his top three receivers can execute it. McDonald doesn't have the size (5-10, 183) or speed to be effective deep, but he's difficult to contain in the 10- to 15-yard range. ... The **49ERS** could target Nebraska DE **Adam Carriker** with the 11th overall pick. Carriker (6-6, 291) has good instincts and could fill the team's need for a big end who can hold up against the run and provide pressure on passing downs. ... Carriker also is on the **RAMS**' draft-day radar, as are Arkansas DE **Jamaal Anderson** and Michigan DT **Alan Branch**. It's highly likely the team will use a first-round pick on a defensive lineman, and coach **Scott Linehan** attended

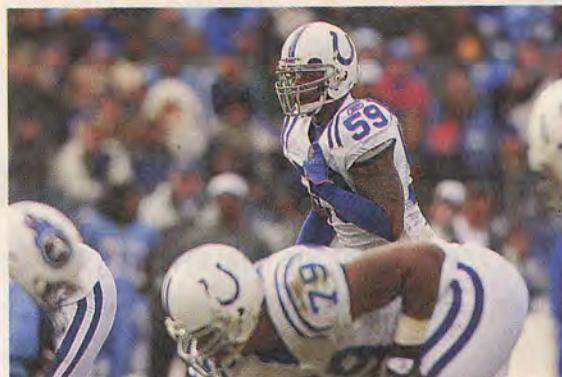


ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

Carriker has set several NFL teams' hearts aflutter.

all three players' pro days. Although Carriker and Anderson wouldn't address the team's most pressing need—nose tackle—they're good all-around ends who would help shore up the run defense. ... The **REDSKINS** could target Clemson's **Gaines Adams**, an explosive pass rusher, with the sixth overall pick, though Anderson might be a better fit because he's stronger against the run and a better fit at left end. LE **Phillip Daniels**, 34, likely has one more solid season left in him, which would give Anderson time to develop. ... Despite **Marcus Pollard**'s age (35) and drop in productivity with the Lions last season, the **SEAHAWKS**

June has the Bucs covered



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Cato June, signed by the Bucs, is a good fit for the team's cover 2 scheme. June may not be adept at stopping the run, but he excels in coverage and likely could have prevented a lot of the big passing plays that hurt the Bucs last season. Though he is accustomed to playing weakside linebacker, June likely will play strongside or middle linebacker for Tampa. If hip and concussion problems keep MLB **Shelton Quarles** from playing, look for June to platoon with **Barrett Ruud** in the middle.

were impressed enough by how well he moves and catches the ball to sign him. Pollard will fill the pass-catching tight end role, a key to the offense, and TE **Will Heller** will handle the bulk of the blocking chores. ... The **PACKERS** might have filled their need for a reliable third corner by signing **Frank Walker**. The team likes its corners to play physical bump coverage, a style for which Walker is suited. He could

play an outside spot in the nickel and dime packages, which would allow CB **Charles Woodson** to move to the slot. ...

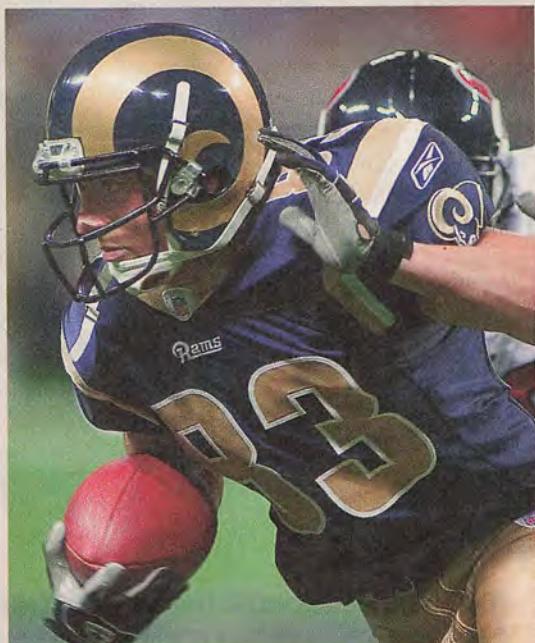
The **GIANTS** are convinced four or five of this year's linebacker prospects are worth a first-round pick—and they almost certainly will draft one with the 20th overall selection. Among the candidates are Penn State's **Paul Posluszny**, Florida State's **Lawrence Timmons** and Oklahoma's **Rufus Alexander**. ... Another sign of the **VIKINGS**' desperate situation at wide receiver: The team recently sent **Troy Williamson** to a hand-eye coordination specialist to determine why he can't adjust to deep balls, and Williamson was given drills for the problem. Wide receiver remains a draft-day priority; if the team trades down from the seventh overall spot, Ohio State's **Ted Ginn** will be a possibility. ...

Terrence Melton, signed by the **PANTHERS**, could be the top backup to oft-injured MLB **Dan Morgan**. Melton lacks Morgan's playmaking ability but covers a lot of ground as a run defender. ... **CARDINALS** coaches aren't ready to give up on CB **Eric Green**, 25. It's questionable how well Green, as well as the team's other cornerbacks, were coached under the previous regime. If Green becomes more consistent, he'll challenge free-agent pickup **Roderick Hood** for a starting job. ... The **BEARS** could target a tight

end in this year's draft, and Delaware's **Ben Patrick** is a possibility in the second or third round. Patrick has reliable hands and would provide a much-needed receiving threat at the position. ... The **COWBOYS'** **Jason Witten** is one of the game's best tight ends—and he continues to improve. If he gets a few more passes thrown his way next season, his numbers will rival those of **Tony Gonzalez** and **Antonio Gates**. Witten (6-5, 265) has excellent hands and can get down the middle of the field to exploit cover 2 defenses.

Fly like an Eagle

Free-agent pickup **Kevin Curtis** fills the Eagles' need for outside speed on offense, particularly with the departure of WR **Donte' Stallworth**. But it's unclear whether Curtis, who was a No. 3 receiver with the Rams and rarely faced double coverage, can make the jump to a starting role in a West Coast offense. He'll start at split end opposite WR **Reggie Brown** and will be counted on to provide yards after the catch.



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

INSIDER MATT HAYES

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Who would be geeked about a first-round football playoff between Florida and Louisiana-Lafayette?

This is my annual BCS-is-better column

(And I'll keep writing one until everyone realizes I'm right)

OK, everyone happy about their fun little NCAA Tournament? Good, but it's no better than the BCS.

In fact, it's worse.

Twenty bucks to the first person who can rattle off all 31 Division I conferences without using the Internet. You don't count, DeCourcy.

Seriously, why are some of these teams even playing Division I basketball? Yet when the biggest event of the season (the national "playoff") rolls around, we've got Eastern Kentucky, Belmont, Wright State—do I really need to continue?—with a chance to play for it all because, well, they're so darn cute.

Meanwhile, Syracuse goes 10-6 in the toughest conference in the nation and is relegated to the NIT—college basketball's version of Shreveport. And don't give me that garbage argument that Syracuse lost to a little guy in the regular season so that must prove *something*.

It proves a team can get hot for one game.

Talk to me when you get hot 10 times in the Big East, Drexel.

College basketball has become some sick payback for all of college football's misgivings. The little guy gets hosed in college football, so, by God, the big guy is getting his in hoops.

People get all bloated and boisterous every fall about the Big East with its automatic BCS berth or when major conferences get two teams in BCS bowls. We plead for a national "playoff" because it's the only way to determine a "true" champion.

Let me explain the truth about the basketball tournament: There are 65 teams in the "playoff" because more teams equals more games, which translates to more television revenue. You don't really think the field was expanded years ago from 48 teams because the NCAA suddenly thought the little guys deserved a shot, do you?

What kind of national "playoff" rewards a team (Davidson) that didn't post one of its 29 wins against a school with an RPI ranking

better than 105? Of course, Davidson did actually beat one other NCAA Tournament team: the mighty Blue Devils of Central Connecticut State—who rebounded from a 4-9 start and rolled through the Northeast Conference, which earned them a first-round seal clubbing from No. 1 seed Ohio State.

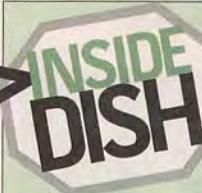
Are you really that hard up to watch Ohio State play Middle Tennessee in the first round of a college football national "playoff"? Just watch the first two weeks of the season; it's the same thing.

Look, George Mason was fun last year. Just like Boise State was fun in the Fiesta Bowl. It's a rarity, not reality.

But somehow, we ridicule college football's postseason yet revel in the glory that is the basketball tournament. They're one in the same, people: inherently awkward systems devised to make money.

Only one is worse than the other: the one that acts like a "playoff."

SN



Michigan WR **Adrian Arrington**, who was suspended from spring practice for an unspecified reason, might not play this fall. If the team loses Arrington, depth at wideout could be an issue: **Mario Manningham** will miss most of spring drills recuperating from an injury, and **Doug Dutch** has asked to move to cornerback.

Greg Mathews, who played well in spots as a freshman last season, is the No. 1 receiver this spring. Losing five-star home-state wideout recruit **Ronald Johnson** to Southern California now hurts even more. > We still don't know why Nebraska RB **Marlon Lucky** was rushed to the hospital last month for a "medical emergency."

But we know this: The Huskers are looking for more depth in their backfield behind **Cody Glenn** and **Lucky**, who is expected to participate in spring drills. DB **Major Culbert** has moved to tailback, and freshman **Marcus Mendoza**, who enrolled early, will be in the mix. > Job No. 1 for Arizona State coach **Dennis Erickson**: restore QB **Rudy Carpenter**'s confidence. Carpenter's pass efficiency slipped more than 40 points last year, and his interceptions increased from two to 14. An injury-plagued line contributed to his poor throws and bad decisions. Erickson needs **Julius Oriekwu** and **Shawn Lauvao**, who once were considered elite line recruits, to play to their potential.



MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN ARCHIVES

BLOGALERT

Arizona coaches must find ways to take advantage of H-back/fullback/tight end Earl Mitchell. He's a 250-pound load with wheels.

Tom Dienhart can bring it, too. After you get his take on the Wildcats' and other BCS teams' springs to-do lists, unload on him at sportingnews.com.

INSIDER KENNY BRUCE



You can't force teams to spend money on a new car, then expect them *not* to spend more money to make it the best.

Debunking the Car of Tomorrow myths

NASCAR's Car of Tomorrow, which is scheduled to make its debut Sunday at Bristol Motor Speedway, will either be one of the best things that has happened to the sport in years or one of the worst.

In all likelihood, it'll be closer to the latter. The car, which has been on NASCAR's drawing board for more than five years, has been touted as the sport's great equalizer. Not only is it supposed to save owners money—by reducing the number of racecars teams must build each season—but the addition of a front splitter and the replacement of the rear spoiler with a rear wing are said to make the cars less aerosensitive. NASCAR says that will promote passing and, hence, provide more entertaining on-track competition. And because the cars have fewer "gray areas" that can be massaged, the competitive gap between large and small teams is expected to shrink.

Here's a news flash: It's all a pipe dream. But NASCAR teams have no choice but to buy in or go home.

Team owners will start saving money only when they decide they no longer want to win races. It's that simple. Even if the Car of

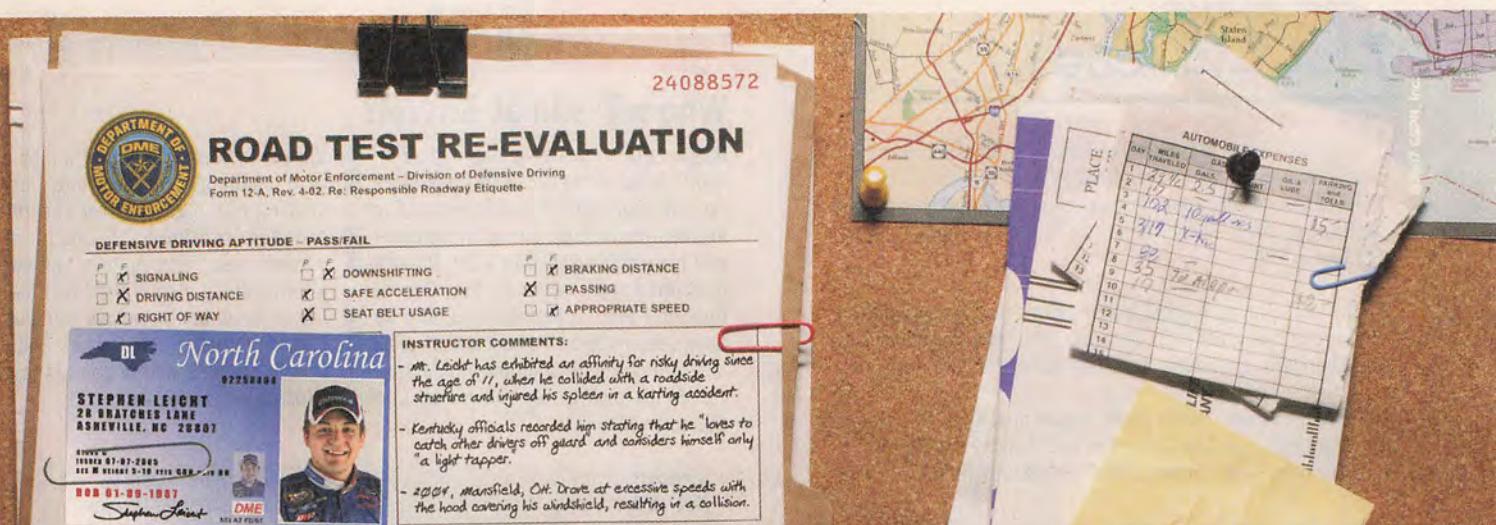


Teams will adjust the rear wing on the Car of Tomorrow until they get an edge ... no matter the cost.

Tomorrow allows teams to build fewer cars, the money saved is going to be used elsewhere in their programs. If a team has a \$15 million sponsor, the owner is going to spend \$15 million, or more, on that team. The money will be

spent on cars or engines or research and development or anything else that increases that team's odds of winning a race—and a championship.

Tire leasing and limits on testing were



NASCAR BUSCH SERIES at BRISTOL

Coverage begins SATURDAY 2:30 PM ET / 11:30 AM PT



It's the Life.

designed to save teams money, too, and we see how that's working out. Teams are on the road more for testing these days than ever before, and they are gathering data on tires that have nothing in common with those used in competition.

As for better competition on the track, more passing likely won't surface for a few years, if it does at all. Through all of the COT testing that has taken place thus far, there has been no clear indication that the new cars are any less aerodependent. Until all the team engineers and crew chiefs figure out a way to massage those "gray areas," the competition is going to be hit-or-miss. The teams that figure out how to get the car to stick to the track and roll through the corners the quickest will be dominant. The rest will struggle. Sound familiar? It should, because it's no different from what's taking place today.

And if it's no different from today, how are the little guys going to benefit? Even if the number of car parts a team can tinker with is cut in half, an organization with more personnel and a bigger budget still is going to overwhelm a team with less of each.

The introduction of the COT is an expensive move that will do little to change the product on the track. A better move would have been to incorporate the safety features of the new car into existing entries and let the teams figure out the aero issues themselves. It is, after all, what they get paid to do.

SN

Kenny Bruce is assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.

SPEED reads

The Car of Tomorrow or Today or Sunday or whatever will be susceptible to damage to the front splitter and back wing. For that reason, drivers adroit at feathering the throttle—and thus avoiding contact—likely will fare well. In other words, Tony Stewart will win.

Kasey Kahne is the biggest disappointment of the year, by far. He won six races last year. This year, he daydreams about the top 35 in points. And maybe a little about soccer moms.

NASCAR is always ripe for great literary analogies. So when was the last time Jack "The Cat in the Hat" Roush—the biggest Toyota critic—read *Chicken Little*? —Matt Crossman

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Organizations with more personnel and bigger budgets always will overwhelm those with less of each.

INSIDE DISH

Kurt Busch

has been bad-fast several times this season but has just one top 10. He had one of the two best cars at Daytona before he wrecked, and he was strong at Las Vegas before he lost a cylinder. The fact he has been solid at all three intermediate tracks bodes well long term for Busch. His best finish is seventh at California; he likely will improve on that Sunday at Bristol. ► The best news about **David Ragan**'s rookie season thus far is he has hardly made any news at all. His debut last year, when he ran two races, was marred by numerous wrecks. Ragan hasn't been at the center of any messes yet this season. He finished an impressive fifth at Daytona but has been inconsistent since then. Of course, better

inconsistent and invisible than inconsistent and in everybody's stuff. ► **Juan Pablo Montoya** got his first Nextel Cup top five in Atlanta. It's impressive that he finished so well this early. The venue made it even more impressive. Of all the Cup tracks, Atlanta is among the most familiar and comfortable for veteran drivers, and that makes it that much harder for a newbie to find success. ► This is not your father's NASCAR, examples 10 bazillion and 10 bazillion and 1: Cell phone companies are fighting over sponsorship exemptions, and the most recent Busch Series race was sponsored by Nicorette. ► How bad is it at Michael Waltrip Racing? **Dale Jarrett** and **Michael Waltrip** have 1,318 starts combined, but neither has turned a qualifying lap fast enough to make a race this season. Without the past champion's provisional, Jarrett would have zero starts. **David Reutimann**, the third member of Michael Waltrip Racing, has just four career starts. But he has qualified for the show twice and

raced his way into the Daytona 500 this season, although he wrecked in all three. Waltrip is 51st—last—in points, with -27. Reutimann is 43rd. Jarrett is 33rd.

► Assuming he doesn't change his mind between now and Sunday, points leader **Mark Martin** will sit out Bristol as he sticks to his plan to run a partial schedule. **Regan Smith** will drive the No. 01 Chevy.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

Pit box

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Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Bristol?

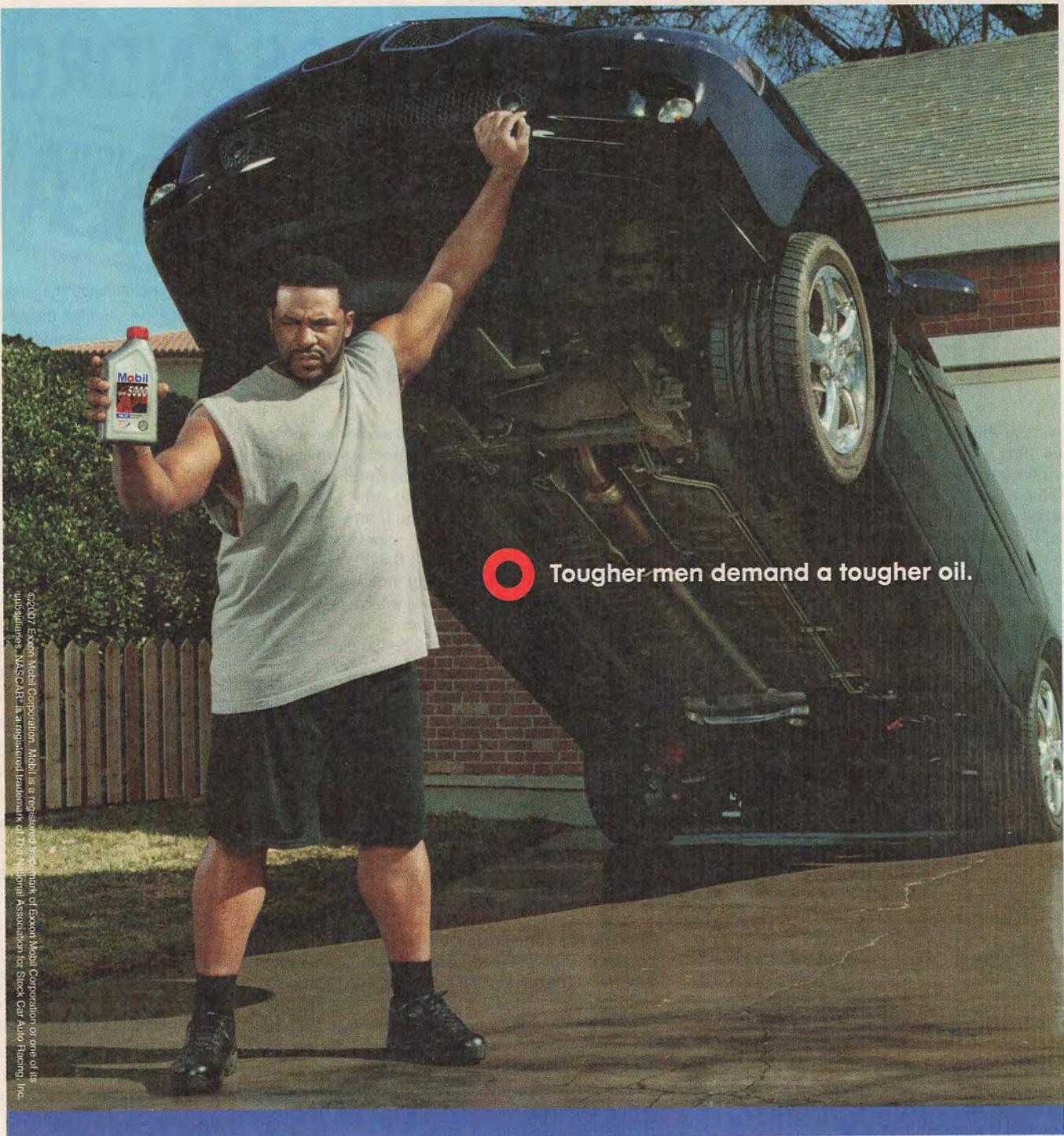
Roger: Kevin Harvick is scary-good on short tracks. In the six short-track races run last year, Harvick had three top five finishes—including a win at Richmond—and his worst finish was 11th. Harvick performed very well at the Car of Tomorrow test on February 28, and he always seems to do his best at the spring race. I'm calling it right now, Vinnie: Harvick is my pick to win the Nextel Cup championship.

Vinnie: The Car of Tomorrow will be a bit of a challenge for everyone, so I'm sticking with a great driver of today to continue to thrive at Bristol. Matt Kenseth was blistering here last August after finishing a solid third last March. There's no doubt he will get stiff competition from both Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch, but after all the paint is traded, Kenseth will be the winner.

- **Sleeper:** Denny Hamlin.
- **Not so fast:** David Stremme.

- **Sleeper:** Kyle Busch.
- **Not so fast:** Clint Bowyer.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Vinnie 468, Roger 361.



Tougher men demand a tougher oil.

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INSIDER DAVE D'ALESSANDRO



Confounding the critics, Isiah is coming back for more.

Project Progress: Thomas is making it work

It was probably a given that the next press conference involving the Knicks and Isiah Thomas would not include party hats and sheet cake. Actually, you might have half-expected it to include a dozen cloves of garlic and the cast from *The Exorcist*.

But there was Knicks president Jim Dolan last week, content and satisfied and pleased to announce that he is content and satisfied and pleased with the work Zeke has done this season. He did this before a small gathering of beat writers, who had been informed of this decision the night before (except I'm personally aware of one who wasn't, apparently because he has been very naughty and such a tip would flout the Dolanian policy of rewarding positive press). At least a few of these writers observed that Thomas looked a bit like the movie hero who doesn't know there's a guy behind the refrigerator with an ax.

Nothing bad happened, however. Zeke's coming back, and this is a good and fair thing, no matter what you think about him personally. He's coming back because he has proved what I said before the season: He is a solid coach, and he will have the Knicks in playoff contention.

Of course, you might have a different interpretation of *progress*, which was the determining factor behind Dolan's suddenly sober decision. One might suggest that if New Jersey and Indiana weren't so lamentably awful this season, the Knicks would be 12 games out of eighth place in the East and Dolan would have already warmed up the wood chipper.

But the Knicks aren't bad ... or let's just say they don't embarrass the uniform as much as they used



That's Marbury right there listening to his coach. Go figure.

to. They've been a win-one-lose-one team since late November. Actually, they're better than .500 (20-19) the past three months, and if they weren't so creatively careless in the endgame, they'd be playoff locks right now—six of their past 14 losses have been by two points or fewer.

So they're hanging around, partly because their chief rivals can't do anything without spraining something and partly because they've rallied around a beleaguered coach who has made them feel better about themselves again. Who can't get behind a story like that, especially a sappy owner who has no basis for comparison?

That's not to diminish Zeke's accomplishments. He has nurtured center Eddy Curry into a force. He has gotten through to point guard Stephon Marbury, whose basketball IQ has increased noticeably. He has turned small forward Quentin Richardson into a multidimensional player. He somehow has managed to get shooting guard Steve Francis to keep his head in the game even after telling him to get lost earlier in the season. He has drafted wisely. He has the Knicks playing hard every night. He has made the Garden a tough place to play again. He has New York in contention despite the prolonged absences of two crucial players, Jamal Crawford and David Lee.

The playoff spot is there for the first team to win five of seven. The Knicks aren't likely to be that team because they have this stupefying habit of blowing games they should win. But that's next year's project. For now, at least they know who will be overseeing it.

SN

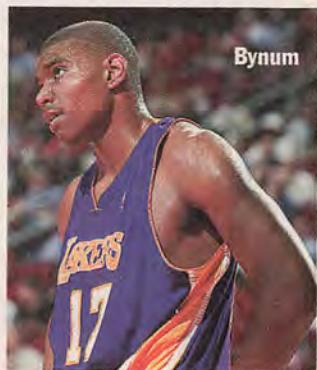
speedread

The Bucks' front office conducted a media blackout for 20 hours while making news for the only time this season. The team announced one coach's firing and another's hiring with press releases—presumably because owner Herb Kohl didn't offer instruction on how to handle the changeover. That was flipping the bird to both Milwaukee fans and the 24-hour news cycle.

Dave D'Alessandro covers the NBA for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.



An inspired thought: The league is considering shipping the All-Star monstrosity overseas. At least that's what sources tell the *Sacramento Bee*. The league will let the Celtics and Timberwolves give the new NBA-quality arena in London a test drive in October. No word on how the NBA would handle the 5- or 6-hour time difference for the American TV market, however. ➤ 76ers president **Billy King**'s decision to bring back coach **Mo Cheeks** for another year was a no-brainer from this perspective: "It's just going to make me work harder this summer," says rising star SF **Andre Iguodala**, who has improved dramatically on Cheeks' watch. ➤ From the Go Figure file: The Cavs are 3-0 without SF **LeBron James** this season and are averaging 117.7 points in those three games. They are 9-2 with LBJ sidelined since he joined the team in 2003-04. ➤ Magic watchers say the team will open the vault this summer for PF **Dwight Howard** and sign him to a six-year, \$87 million extension. ➤ C **Andrew Bynum** has lost his starting job again, this time because of a sprained ankle and because C **Kwame Brown** is outplaying him. The Lakers also believe Bynum, 19, has hit a wall.



Bynum



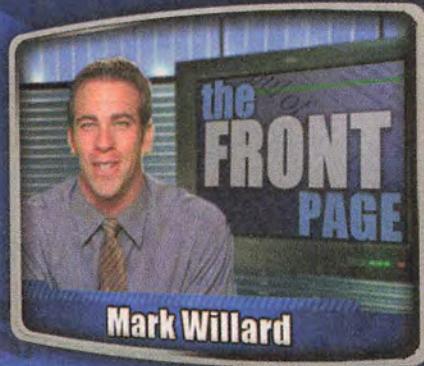
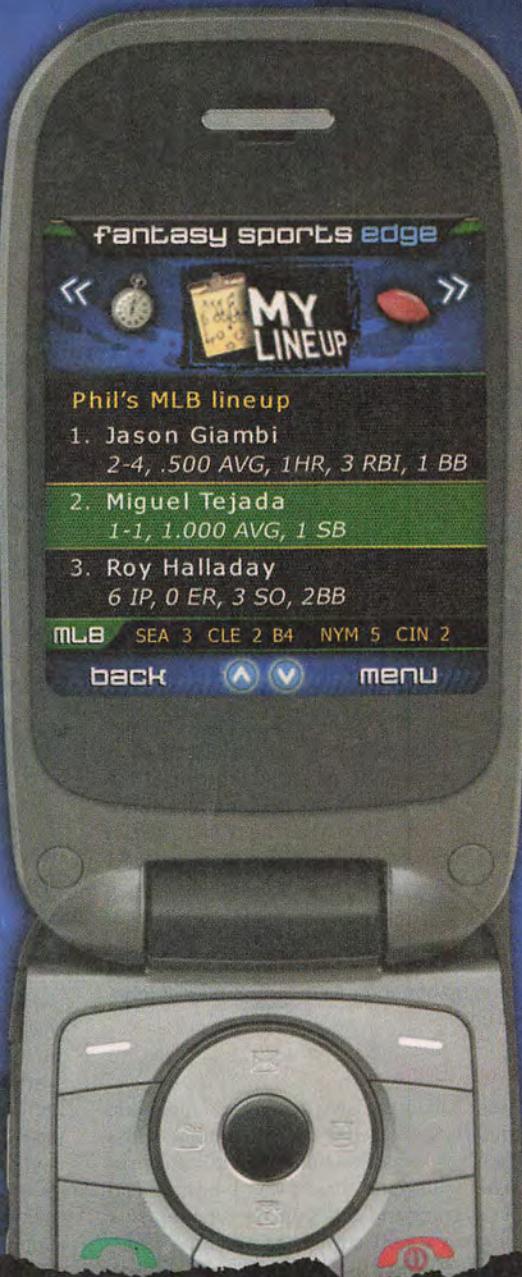
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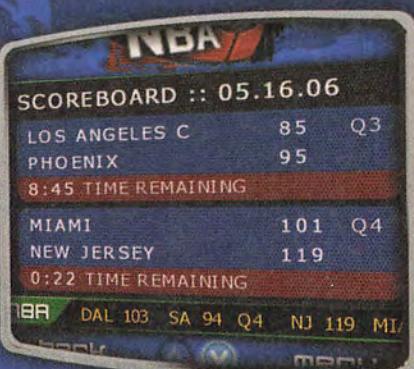
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It's not always the No. 1 who gets it done in the postseason. Remember last year?

Playoff heroes-in-waiting

Cam Ward. Two words you did not read in last season's SPORTING NEWS playoff preview, in which I picked the Hurricanes to win the Cup.

You know Cam Ward. He was the Canes' 22-year-old backup goalie as the regular season ended and turned into the Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP.

I won't be fooled again. Three goaltenders who currently are backups could end up being heroes by the time the Stanley Cup is held aloft.

Mike Smith, Stars

Everyone knows the story of Marty Turco, the Stars' No. 1 goalie. Usually dominant in the regular season, he has faltered in playoffs past. In 22 playoff games, Turco is 8-14 with a 2.54 goals-against average and .892 save percentage. The past two seasons, he and the Stars have lost their first-round series in five games.

This year, Turco has been shaky in the regular season, which has opened up an opportunity for Smith, 25. The rookie has taken advantage of the situation, and now the Stars are keeping him sharp (and trusting him in key games) as the regular season winds down. Entering the week Smith was 10-5-1 with a 2.10 goals-against average and .916 save percentage.

Turco will get the nod when the playoffs begin, but his leash will be short. The Stars may turn to Smith (and could end up better for it) if Turco's playoff problems pop up again.

Chris Mason, Predators

Despite less than impressive postseason numbers, Mason earned the confidence of his teammates last season when No. 1 Tomas Vokoun was out because of blood clots. In the playoffs, Mason was 1-4 with a 3.45 goals-against average and .901 save percentage. This season, he has come back strong and essentially split time with Vokoun, who has battled a thumb injury. Mason (24-11-2, 2.38, .926 going into the week) has been a key contributor to the Predators' excellent season. He is not a kid—he will turn 31 on April 20—and will take last season's playoff experience into this postseason. He won't be overwhelmed by the situation if the Predators call on him.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

If the Stars start slipping again in the playoffs, Smith could help break their fall.

Ilya Bryzgalov, Ducks

After struggling a bit in January as the starter when Jean-Sebastien Giguere was injured, Bryzgalov has bounced back and played well in spot starts, particularly his past few. Entering the week, he was 8-7-4 with a 2.65 goals-against average and .898 save percentage. Bryzgalov, 26, is in his second full NHL season and got playoff experience last year, when he went 6-4 with a 1.46 goals-against average, .944 save percentage and three shutouts. Giguere, of course, has a little playoff experience, too. He carried the Ducks to the Stanley Cup Finals in 2003 and won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. Giguere has played well down the stretch, but if he struggles (or gets injured), the Ducks' Cup hopes won't head off the ice with him.

SN

 Don't head into the playoffs unprepared; keep up with all the latest news and analysis at sportingnews.com/nhl.

speedread

Congratulations to Mario Lemieux, the man who saved Pittsburgh and the Penguins once again. And congratulations to the Penguins' fans, who had to deal with a roller-coaster ride of negotiations but came out winners in the end—they get to watch Sidney Crosby and the rest of the talented young Pens grow up in the Steel City.

The Flyers did the right thing when they extended G.M. **Paul Holmgren**'s contract. Since taking over early this season, Holmgren has done well in his attempts to build for the future. His move to get **Martin Biron** may have looked strange initially—the Flyers didn't appear to be in need of a goalie—but it could help turn the team around. Biron loved playing in Philly as a visitor and has the drive to prove he's a No. 1 after backing up **Ryan Miller** in Buffalo. ➤ The goalie controversy in Minnesota is over—**Niklas Backstrom** is the new No. 1, and **Manny Fernandez** has accepted moving into a backup role gracefully. If Backstrom struggles, though, Fernandez will be right back in. The Wild will retain its chance of being a spoiler in the playoffs. ➤ **C Sidney Crosby** is a star; **RW Mark Recchi**

is a household name. So who's the third guy on the Penguins' top line, and what does he bring? **LW Ryan Malone** (6-4, 216) has the much-needed size to clear room for his linemates and go to the net. ➤ The team that gets the No. 5 seed in the West will have drawn the short straw because it will get a first-round matchup with the No. 2 team in the Central Division—the Red Wings or Predators. Detroit and Nashville are the best teams in the West. ➤ When it's a goalie's nature to wander in net, reeling him in could mess with his rhythm. But goalies need to think. The Islanders' **Rick DiPietro** dived headfirst into a collision that occurred closer to the blue line than the crease in a key loss to the Canadiens last week. He had to leave the game with an injury and jeopardized the team's playoff hopes.

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